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No. 4

ORBIT

Science Fiction

**EARTH'S
LAST NIGHT**

by Alfred Coppel

No. 4 • 35¢



August Derleth, Alan E. Nourse, James F. Gunn, Milton Lesser

ORBIT Science Fiction

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SCIENCE NOTES

As
reported
by
SCIENCE SERVICE

UNDERSTANDING extra-terrestrial beings should not be difficult unless they are far more inhuman than we imagine. So said Dr. Claude E. Shannon of Bell Telephone Laboratories at a symposium on space travel sponsored by the American Museum—Hayden Planetarium in New York.

Basic arithmetic would be the first bridge of understanding if some intelligent response were received from a celestial planet.

As an example of establishing communication between Earth and another planet, Dr. Shannon pointed out that equipment is now available which can transmit radio messages to Mars and receive replies if any were sent out.

A long-sought mystery particle of the atom, the negative proton, has been discovered in a cosmic ray photograph, it is believed. If true,

science will have found the force which holds nucleus particles together.

• •
An artificial moon zooming around the Earth every four hours would be of "inestimable value" as a storm patrol, Dr. Harry Wexler of the United States Weather Bureau has stated.

Hurricanes, incipient tornadoes and jet streams are among the weather conditions that could be spotted from a satellite vehicle four thousand miles above the surface. From that vantage point, cloud "streets" and formations would indicate wind direction and developing storms.

The visual cloud patrol could be made automatically by a television camera if the object were unmanned. For predicting tomorrow's weather as well as for spotting storms, a pole-to-pole orbit around the Earth would be best.

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SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

LAST NIGHT

by Alfred Coppel

WHEN THE END COMES,
IT WILL BE DIFFERENT FROM
ANYTHING MAN HAS
IMAGINED—AND
IT WILL ALSO BE DIFFERENT
FOR EACH OF US
WHO MUST FACE IT ALONE.

THERE were fires burning in the city. With the house dark—the power station was deserted by this time—Tom Henderson could see the fires clearly. They reflected like bonfires against the pall of smoke.

He sat in the dark, smoking and listening to the reedy voice of the announcer that came out of the battery-powered portable radio.

"—mean temperatures are rising to abnormal heights all over the world. Paris reports a high yesterday of 110 degrees . . . Naples was 115 . . . astronomers predict . . . the government requests that the civil population remain calm. Martial law has been declared in Los Angeles—"

The voice was faint. The batteries were low. Not that it mattered. *With all our bickering*, Henderson thought, *this is the finish. And we haven't got what it takes to face it.* It was so simple, really. No war of the worlds, no collision with another planet. A slight rise in temperature. Just that. The astronomers had discovered it first, of course. And there had been reassuring statements

of SUMMER



to the press. The rise in temperature would be small. Ten percent, give or take a few million degrees. They spoke of surface-tensions, internal stresses and used all the astrophysical terms not one man in two million had ever taken the trouble to understand. And what they said to the world was that on the last night of summer it would die.

It would be gradual at first. Temperatures had been high all summer. Then on September 22nd, there would be a sudden surge of heat from that familiar red ball in the sky. The surface temperature of the earth would be raised to 200° centigrade for seventeen hours. Then everything would be back to normal.

Henderson grinned vacuously at the empty air. *Back to normal.* The seas, which would have boiled away, would condense and fall as hot rain for a month or so, flooding the land, washing away all traces of man's occupation—those that hadn't burned. And in two months, the temperature would be down to where a man could walk on the surface without protective clothing.

Only there would not be very many men left. There would only be the lucky ones with the talismans of survivals, the metal disks that gave access to the Burrows. Out of a population of two billions, less than a million would survive.

The announcer sounded bone-weary. *He should,* Henderson thought. *He's been on the air for ten*

hours or more without relief. We all do what we can. But it isn't much.

"—no more applicants are being taken for the Burrows—"

I should hope not, Henderson thought. There had been so little time. Three months. That they had been able to build the ten Burrows was tribute enough. But then money hadn't mattered, had it? He had to keep reminding himself that the old values didn't apply. Not money, or materials, or even labor—that standby of commerce. Only time. And there hadn't been any of that.

"—population of Las Vegas has been evacuated into several mines in the area—"

Nice try, but it wouldn't work, Henderson thought languidly. If the heat didn't kill, the overcrowding would. And if that failed, then the floods would succeed. And of course there would be earthquakes. *We can't accept catastrophe on this scale,* he told himself. *We aren't equipped mentally for it any better than we are physically.* The only thing a man could understand were his own problems. And this last night of summer made them seem petty, small, as though they were being viewed through the wrong end of a telescope.

I'm sorry for the girls, he thought. Lorrie and Pam. They should have had a chance to grow up. He felt a tightness in his throat as he thought of his daughters. Eight and ten are sad ages to die.

But he hadn't thought of them before, why should the end of the world make it any different? He had left them and Laura, too. For what? For Kay and money and a kind of life that would go out in a bright flash with the coming of dawn. They all danced their minuscule ballet on the rim of the world while he sat, drained of purpose or feeling, watching them through that reversed telescope.

He wondered where Kay was now. All over the city there were Star Parties going on. The sky the limit tonight! Anything you want. Tomorrow—*bang!* Nothing denied, nothing forbidden. This is the last night of the world, kiddo!

Kay had dressed—if that was the word—and gone out at seven. "I'm not going to sit here and just wait!" He remembered the hysteria in her voice, the drugged stupor in her eyes. And then Trina and those others coming in, some drunk, others merely giddy with terror. Trina wrapped in her mink coat, and dancing around the room singing in a shrill, cracked voice. And the other girl—Henderson never could remember her name, but he'd remember her now for all the time there was left—naked except for her jewels. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds—all glittering and sparkling in the last rays on the swollen sun. And the tears streamed down her cheeks as she begged him to make love to her—

It was a nightmare. But it was

real. The red sun that slipped into the Pacific was real. The fires and looting in the city were not dreams. This was the way the world was ending. Star Parties and murder in the streets, and women dressed in gems, and tears—a million gallons of tears.

Outside there was the squeal of tires and a crash, then the tinkling of broken glass and silence. A shot came from down the street. There was a cry that was part laughter and part scream.

I'm without purpose, Henderson thought. *I sit and watch and wait for nothing.* And the radio's voice grew fainter still.

—"those in the Burrows will survive . . . in mines and caves . . . geologists promise a forty percent survival . . . behind the iron curtain—"

Behind the iron curtain, surely nothing. Or perhaps it would be instantaneous, not sweeping across the world with dawn. Of course, it would be instantaneous. The sun would swell—oh, so slightly—and eight minutes later, rivers, lakes, streams, the oceans—everything wet—would boil up into the sky . . .

From the street came a rasping repetitive cry. Not a woman. A man. He was burning. A street gang had soaked him with gasoline and touched him with a match. They followed him shrieking: *preview, preview!* Henderson watched him through the window as he ran with that *unuh unuh unuh* noise seeming-

ingly ripped from his throat. He vanished around the corner of the next house, closely pursued by his tormentors.

I hope the girls and Laura are safe, Henderson thought. And then he almost laughed aloud. Safe. What was safety now? *Maybe*, he thought, *I should have gone with Kay*. Was there anything left he wanted to do that he had never done? Kill? Rape? Any sensation left untasted? The night before, at the Gilmans', there had been a ludicrous Black Mass full of horror and asininity: pretty Louise Gilman taking the guests one after another amid the broken china and sterling silver on the dining table while her husband lay half-dead of self-administered morphine.

Our set, Henderson thought. *Brokers, bankers, people who matter*. God, it was bad enough to die. But to die without dignity was worse yet. And to die without purpose was abysmal.

Someone was banging at the door, scratching at it, shrieking. He sat still.

"Tom—Tom—it's Kay! Let me in, for God's sake!"

Maybe it was Kay. Maybe it was and he should let her stay outside. *I should keep what shreds of dignity*. *I have*, he thought, *and die alone, at least*. How would it have been to face this thing with Laura? Any different? Or was there anything to choose? *I married Laura*, he thought. *And I married Kay, too*. It was easy.

If a man could get a divorce every two years, say, and he lived to be sixty-five, say—then how many women could he marry? And if you assumed there were a billion women in the world, what percentage would it be?

"Let me in, Tom, damn you! I know you're there!"

Eight and ten isn't very old, he thought. *Not very old, really*. They might have been wonderful women . . . to lay amid the crockery and co-habit like animals while the sun got ready to blow up?"

"Tom . . .!"

He shook his head sharply and snapped off the radio. The fires in the city were brighter and bigger. Not sunfires, those. Someone had set them. He got up and went to the door. He opened it. Kay stumbled in, sobbing. "Shut the door, oh, God, shut it!"

He stood looking at her torn clothes—what there was of them—and her hands. They were sticky red with blood. He felt no horror, no curiosity. He experienced nothing but a dead feeling of loss. *I never loved her*, he thought suddenly. *That's why*.

She reeked of liquor and her lipstick was smeared all over her face. "I gave him what he wanted," she said shrilly. "The filthy swine coming to mix with the dead ones and then run back to the Burrow—" Suddenly she laughed. "Look, Tom—look!" She held out one bloody hand.

Two disks gleamed dully in her palm.

"We're safe, safe—" She said it again and again, bending over the disks and crooning to them.

Henderson stood in the dim hallway, slowly letting his mind understand what he was seeing. Kay had killed a man for those tickets into the Burrow.

"Give them to me," he said.

She snatched them away. "No."

"I want them, Kay."

"No, nononono—" She thrust them into the torn bosom of her dress. "I came back. I came back for you. That's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," Henderson said. And it was also true that she couldn't have hoped to reach a Burrow alone. She would need a car and a man with a gun. "I understand, Kay," he said softly, hating her.

"If I gave them to you, you'd take Laura," she said. "Wouldn't you? *Wouldn't you?* Oh, I know you, Tom, I know you so well. You'd never gotten free of her or those two sniveling brats of yours—"

He struck her sharply across the face, surprised at the rage that shook him.

"Don't do that again," she said, glaring hatred at him. "I need you right now, but you need me more. You don't know where the Burrow is. I do."

It was true, of course. The entrances to the Burrows would have to be secret, known only to those chosen to survive. Mobs would storm

them otherwise. And Kay had found out from the man—that man who had paid with his life for forgetting that there were only potential survivors now and animals.

"All right, Kay," Henderson said. "I'll make a bargain with you."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I'll tell you in the car. Get ready. Take light things." He went into the bedroom and took his Luger from the bedside table drawer. Kay was busy stuffing her jewelry into a handbag. "Come on," he said. "That's enough. Plenty. There isn't much time."

They went down into the garage and got into the car. "Roll up the windows," he said. "And lock the doors."

"All right."

He started the engine and backed onto the street.

"What's the bargain?" Kay asked.

"Later," he said.

He put the car in gear and started down out of the residential district, going through the winding, wooded drives. There were dark shapes running in the shadows. A man appeared in the headlights' beam and Henderson swerved swiftly by him. He heard shots behind. "Keep down," he said.

"Where are we going? This isn't the way."

"I'm taking the girls with me," he said. "With us."

"They won't let them in."

"We can try."

"You fool, Tom! They won't let them in, I say!"

He stopped the car and twisted around to look at her. "Would you rather try to make it on foot?"

Her face grew ugly with a renaissance of fear. She could see her escape misting away. "All right. But I tell you they won't let them in. No one gets into a Burrow without a disk."

"We can try." He started the car again, driving fast along the littered streets toward Laura's apartment.

At several points the street was blocked with burning debris, and once a gang of men and women almost surrounded them, throwing rocks and bits of wreckage at the car as he backed it around.

"You'll get us both killed for nothing," Kay said wildly.

Tom Henderson looked at his wife and felt sick for the wasted years. "We'll be all right," he said.

He stopped the car in front of Laura's. There were two overturned cars on the sidewalk. He unlocked the door and got out, taking the keys with him. "I won't be long," he said.

"Say good-by to Laura for me," Kay said, her eyes glittering.

"Yes," he said. "I will."

A shadow moved menacingly out of the dark doorway. Without hesitation, Tom Henderson lifted the Luger and fired. The man fell and did not move. *I've just killed a man*, Henderson thought. And then: *But what*

does it matter on the last night of summer?

He shot away the lock and walked swiftly up the dark hallway, up the two flights of stairs he remembered so well. At Laura's door he knocked. There was movement within. The door opened slowly.

"I've come for the girls," he said.

Laura stepped back. "Come in," she said.

The scent she wore began to prod memories. His eyes felt unaccountably hot and wet. "There's very little time," he said.

Laura's hand was on his in the dark. "You can get them into a Burrow?" she asked. And then faintly. "I put them to bed. I didn't know what else to do."

He couldn't see her, but he knew how she would look: the close-cropped sandy hair; the eyes the color of rich chocolates; her so familiar body supple and warm under the wrapper; the smell and taste of her. It didn't matter now, nothing mattered on this last crazy night of the world.

"Get them," he said. "Quickly."

She did as she was told. Pam and Lorrie—he could hear them complaining softly about being awakened in the middle of the night—soft little bodies, with the musty-childish odor of sleep and safety. Then Laura was kneeling, holding them against her, each in turn. And he knew the tears must be wet on her cheeks. He thought: *say good-by and make it*

quick. Kiss your children good-by and watch them go out while you remain alone in the dark that isn't ever going to end. Ah, Laura, Laura—

"Take them quickly, Tom," Laura said. And then she pressed herself against him just for an instant. "I love you, Tom. I never stopped."

He lifted Pam into his arms and took Lorrie's hand. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"Good-by, Tom," Laura said, and closed the door behind him.

"Isn't Mommy coming?" Pam asked sleepily.

"Another time, baby," Tom said softly.

He took them out to the waiting car and Kay.

"They won't take them," she said. "You'll see."

"Where is it, Kay?"

She remained sullenly silent and Henderson felt his nerves cracking. "Kay—"

"All right." She gave him directions grudgingly, as though she hated to share her survival with him. She wouldn't look at the girls, already asleep in the back of the car.

They drove through the city, the looted, tortured city that burned and echoed to the shrill gaiety of Star Parties and already stank of death.

Twice, they were almost struck by careening cars, filled with drunken, naked, insane people, all with the desperate desire to make this last night more vivid than all the others back to the very beginning of time.

The headlights illuminated tableaux from some wild inferno as the car swung around through the concrete cemetery the city had become:

A woman hung by the ankles, her skirt shrouding her face and upper body, her legs and buttocks flayed . . .

Psalm singers kneeling in the street, not moving as a truck cut a swath through their midst. And the hymn, thin and weak, heard over the moans of the dying: *Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee . . .*

Sudden sun-worshippers and troglodytes dancing round a fire of burning books . . .

The death throes of a world, Henderson thought. What survives the fire and flood will have to be better.

And then they had reached the silent hill that was the entrance to the Burrow, the miles-deep warren clothed in refrigerator pipes and cooling earth. "There," Kay said. "Where you see the light. There'll be a guard."

Behind them, the fires burned in the city. The night was growing lighter, lit by a rising moon, a moon too red, too large. *Four hours left, perhaps, Tom thought. Or less.*

"You can't take them," Kay was whispering harshly. "If you try they might not let us in. It's kinder to let them stay here—asleep. They'll never know."

"That's right," Tom said.

Kay got out of the car and started up the grassy slope. "Then come on!"

Halfway up the hill, Henderson could make out the pacing figure of the guard: death watch on a world. "Wait a minute," he said.

"What is it?"

"Are you sure we can get in?"

"Of course."

"No questions asked?"

"All we need are the disks. They can't know everybody who belongs."

"No," Tom said quietly. "Of course not." He stood looking at Kay under the light of the red moon.

"Tom—"

He took Kay's hand. "We weren't worth much, were we, Kay."

Her eyes were bright, wide, staring.

"You didn't really expect anything else, did you?"

"Tom—Tom!"

The pistol felt light in his hand.

"I'm your wife—" she said hoarsely.

"Let's pretend you're not. Let's pretend it's a Star Party."

"My God—please—nonono—"

The Luger bucked in his hand. Kay sank to the grass awkwardly and lay there, eyes glazed and open in horrified surprise. Henderson opened her dress and took the two disks from between her breasts. Then he covered her carefully and shut her eyes with his forefinger. "You didn't miss much, Kay," he said looking down at her. "Just more of the same."

He went back to the car and woke up the girls.

"Where are we going now, Daddy?" Pam asked.

"Up there on the hill, dear. Where the light is."

"Carry me?"

"Both of you," he said, and dropped the Luger into the grass. He picked them up and carried them up the hill to within a hundred feet of the bunker entrance. Then he put them down and gave them each a disk. "Go to the light and give the man there these," he said, and kissed them both.

"You're not coming?"

"No, babies."

Lorrie looked as though she might start crying.

"I'm afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Tom said.

"Nothing at all," Pam said.

Tom watched them go. He saw the guard kneel and hug them both. *There is some kindness in this stripping of inhibitions*, Henderson thought, *something is left after all*. They disappeared into the Burrow and the guard stood up saluting the darkness with a wave. Henderson turned and walked back down the hill, skirting the place where Kay lay face to the sky. A warm dry wind touched his face. *Time running out quickly now*, he thought. He got into the car and started back toward the city. There were still a few hours left of this last night of summer, and Laura and he could watch the red dawn together. • • •

Beast in the House

by Michael Shaara

THE DOG walked out of the trees on the far side of the mountain and paused for a moment in the sun. Betty was on the porch, knitting. Her head was down and she did not see it. The dog's head swivelled slowly, gun-like, came to rest with the black nose pointed up the hill. The morning was clear and cool,



TERROR CAN TAKE MANY FORMS. IN THIS CASE

IT IS A DOG—JUST A DOG—WHOSE EARS DO NOT MOVE.

the grass was freshly wet. After a moment the dog began to move.

It came on across the meadow and up the long hill, moving in a steady, unvarying line toward Betty and the house. It broke through the bushes down by the garage, came up the gravel path with stiff even strides, until the shadow of it blotted the corner of her eye. Startled, she looked up.

At the front steps it stopped and waited, watching. Betty dropped her knitting in her lap.

"Well, hel-lo," said Betty, smiling. She leaned forward and held out a hand toward the dog, making coaxing, clucking noises. But the dog did not move. It stood motionless on the gravel before her, watching her silently with round, brassy eyes.

"Whose dog are you?" said Betty, clucking again cheerfully. These silent mountain mornings were often very lonely; with the baby asleep they were lonelier still. She rose up from the rocker and walked down the porch steps, her hand outstretched. It backed stiffly away.

"Oh, come on," she smiled. "I won't hurt you."

The dog continued to back away, stopped when she stopped, but did not turn its eyes. After a while she gave up trying to say hello and went back up onto the porch. The dog kept watching her gravely and she was forced to laugh.

"Coward," she said coaxingly, "fraidy cat."

The dog did not move.

It was not a neighbor's dog. Even though she knew very little about dogs she was certain she had never seen this one before. It was a big dog, larger than most; she hazarded a guess that it was what they called a police dog. It was long and trim, sleek, with high, stiff pointed ears. Deciding that perhaps if she fed the dog it might begin to cotton up to her, she went inside to the icebox for some cold scraps of chicken. While she was inside she heard the dog come onto the porch. But when she returned it ran quickly back down the steps. It resumed its position on the lawn, watching.

She set down the chicken on the lawn, but the dog wouldn't touch it. It seemed preoccupied with her. For several moments she smiled and asked it questions, but it never even sat down, and it never moved its eyes from her face.

Presently she felt a slight annoyance. There was something odd in the dog's stare, something nerveless and chill and unvarying, almost *clinical*, as if the thing were examining her. She shrugged and bent to her knitting, forgetful and relaxed for a moment.

But she couldn't help looking up. The dog's eyes, like balls of cold metal, were still on her. It was a peculiar, ridiculous thing, to be stared at like this by a dog. She began to grow irritated.

"All right," she said at last, peev-

ishly, "if you won't be friends, then shoo!"

The dog did not move. She went down off the porch and tried to chase it. But it only retreated as before, silently, watching. When she tired and sat down, it took up its place on the lawn again and waited.

Well, I never, she said to herself. She had no idea what the dog wanted. Gradually, under the pressure of the cold metal eyes, she felt the beginnings of a slight fear. The thing was certainly strange. She knew very little about the behavior of dogs, but she had never known a dog—or any animal, for that matter—to sit so long in one place just to watch.

Unless it was about to pounce, the thought came to her.

Momentarily she felt unnerved. But it was silly, she chided herself, dogs didn't do that sort of thing. And there was nothing hostile about the dog. It was just standing there, stiff-legged and gray, observing.

Now for the first time she began to examine the dog in detail. She sensed immediately that something was wrong—*physically* wrong. It was a short while before she could place it—those blank, staring eyes distracted her—but then she remembered.

The ears of the dog did not move.

All around her in the air there were light, sudden sounds, far-off grindings of trucks on the highway, quick calls of birds; yet the ears of the dog did not move at all. *But the ears should move*, Betty thought con-

fusedly. She had noticed even as a little girl that the ears of most animals were never still, that they swivelled automatically to follow sudden sounds even when the animal was preoccupied. The ears of this dog were high and free, and . . . why didn't they move?

It was very odd. She had begun to retreat unconsciously toward the screen door behind her when she heard the baby begin to cry. Suddenly she felt released from thinking of the dog, and she went inside almost gratefully to prepare the bottle. A few moments later she came back quickly and locked the door.

Shortly after noon she looked out again and the dog was gone. She was relieved for a moment, and at the same time she felt angry with herself for being upset over such a little thing. Then she saw the dog again. The door of the garage was open, and she saw the dog come out and look immediately toward the house, toward the window, as if it knew she was there. She watched with a new, growing terror as the dog walked stiffly across the grass and disappeared behind the barn.

This morning, when her husband left, she had locked the garage door!

Of that she was certain, yet the door now faced her—dark and open. She continued to tell herself that she was being perfectly silly, but she went around immediately and checked all the locks on all the doors

and windows of the house. For the rest of the afternoon she sat stiffly in the parlor trying to read, halting occasionally with real fright as the dark form of the dog padded by her window. Toward the end of the afternoon there was a crash from the cellar. Somehow the dog had gotten in. Immediately, and for some unknown reason, she feared for the baby. She ran to bolt the door and listen, terrified. But there was no sound. Finally she thought of her husband's gun. She found it in a drawer and locked herself in the nursery with the baby. In the evening when her husband returned she was hysterical.

The next day was Saturday and Harry stayed home. He knew his wife well enough not to be amused at what she had told him; he took the gun and searched for the dog carefully, but it was gone. How it had gotten into the cellar or the garage he had no idea. Like most country men he had a respect for dogs, but he supposed that the doors had not been locked. Anyway, by morning Betty seemed to be pretty well recovered and calm. He saw no reason to talk about the dog any more and went out to the barn to putter with the homemade three-inch telescope which was his hobby. Later on he came back to the house for a while to play with the baby. The day passed and the dog did not return.

In the evening, as was their cus-

tom, they went out under the stars. They lay down in the cool grass of the lawn. Harry began to talk about a great many things, about the office and about taking up painting as a hobby, and about the way the baby called everything "didi." Betty lay back and said nothing.

She was a tiny girl, moody, new to the wide mountain loneliness and in many ways unsure. She was given to long silent periods which she could not explain and which Harry had learned not to try to question. As she lay now restlessly in the silent dark, a small-edged wheel of uneasiness whirling inside her, Harry did not ask what was wrong. Instead he became consciously boyish and cheerful, began to talk happily about nothing in particular.

It did not occur to him that she might still be thinking of the dog—by this time he had forgotten the dog completely. What he was doing was ritual. In a little while she would reach over and pat his hand and begin to smile, and whatever had bothered her would die away. He was fully aware of the childlike, deceptively naive and charming quality which he seemed to be able to turn on at will, and he saw no reason not to use it. And she knew that too, but it did not bother her.

On this evening, as always, she began to respond. She was just beginning to return to herself when she saw the dog.

She put one hand to the throat of

her blouse. With the other she clutched Harry's arm. The dog was not moving and Harry had to search before he saw it.

It was a sharp-pointed shadow, black and lean, by the corner of the garage. The moon shone down with a pale, glowing flow; in the softness and the radiance the dog stood out with an odd unmoving heaviness. Its legs drove sharply into the ground below it, like black roots. It had been standing there, perhaps, for quite some time.

Harry started to rise. At his movement the dog turned and walked silently into the bushes, vanished. Harry was about to walk down toward the spot when Betty pulled at his arm.

"No!" she said earnestly, and he was astonished at the strong edge of fear in her voice. "No, please, let it go!"

"But honey—" he looked at her, then back toward the bushes where the dog had disappeared. He was about to say that it was only a *dog*, when he recalled quite clearly that it was, after all, a fairly large animal.

"Well," he said, "all right." He patted her arm soothingly. He was thinking that the thing might just possibly be wild. And there was no sense in dashing off into the woods to look for it. Not in the dark, at any rate, although if it kept coming back like this, frightening Betty—

"Was that the same dog?" He led her toward the house. She nodded,

looking back over her shoulder. She was trembling.

"I think so. I . . . couldn't really see, but I think so."

He folded his arm protectively on her shoulder, squeezed warmly.

"Poor old hound's probably just looking for a home. Probably lost. Let's go put out a plate of—"

"It was watching, just like the other time."

He grinned.

"Unfortunately, it didn't see much. Remind me to draw the blinds tonight."

"Harry, it was watching us."

She was insistent; her hands were balled at her sides and she continued to look back.

"What does it want?" she said, still trembling.

"Now honey—"

"It was looking for something." She stopped on the porch and stared out into the blackness. "It was looking for something in the house and the garage. What does it want?"

He marched her firmly inside and put her to bed. He promised to go out looking for the thing in the morning. Joking was of no value now, and so he turned on the radio and played soft music. He chatted brightly about baby-sitting problems. The light was out and he was almost asleep when he heard the soft pads come up on the porch.

Suddenly and thoroughly angry, he dashed to the door. When he reached it the dog was gone.

The same thing happened again three times during the night.

In the morning Ed Benson drove down from his farm on the hill, pulled up with a sliding crunch on the gravel in front of the porch. Normally, he was a glum and unexcited man. But right now he was very much annoyed, and his face was bright red against the gray of his hair as he slammed the car door and stalked up onto the porch.

"Some louse," he roared huskily, flinging out a red-plaid arm to point at the mountain, "some slimy, miserable, cotton-pickin' louse done killed a dog!"

Harry grinned instantly, without thinking of the effect on Benson. It had been a long night, mostly sleepless. So the doggone thing had pestered one porch too many. He wiped the grin off as Benson glared at him. "What in hell are you laughin' at? Dog killin' all right by you? Why, for two cents I'd whomp—"

"No no, Ed, no," Harry said quickly, soberly. "I wasn't thinkin' about that at all, really. Now—what's the trouble? Somebody kill a dog? Who? What dog?"

"I don't know who killed it and I don't know what dog!" Benson roared again, impotently. "All I know is they's a poor mangled carcass lyin' up there on the mountain. Skinned. *Skinned*, by God, can you tie that?"

Harry's eyes widened. He did not

have Benson's great love for dogs—which in most cases surpassed his love for people—but Harry had never heard of anyone skinning a dog. The thought was revolting.

"—and if I ever find the mangy louse that done it, I'll strangle him, I swear!"

He went on to ask if Harry had seen any strangers around lately. No mountain man would have done such a thing. Harry was shaking his head when Betty came out onto the porch.

She had heard the word "dog." She stood wiping her hands nervously on a dish towel, the sleeplessness of last night thick in her eyes.

In the presence of a woman Benson calmed a little and told them what had happened.

"I found the carcass out back in the woods this morning. The skin was gone. Can you figure that? They skinned the dog neat like a rabbit, then took the skin. Why, in hell would they want the skin?"

He lifted his bony hands helplessly. Harry was still shocked.

"Are you sure it was a dog's body?" Betty said.

"Sure I'm sure. Couldn't be nothin' else. Too big. Looked like a German police dog. Only dog I know like that is Bill Kuhn's, over at Huntsville, but I called him right away and he said his dog was right there."

He stopped to look with surprise at Betty. She was relaxing now, lift-

ing a hand to smooth back her hair as the tenseness went out of her. She spoke to Harry.

"I'll bet it was the same one."

Harry nodded.

"The same what?" Benson asked, looking from one to the other. They told him about the dog on the porch, and he agreed that it was mighty queer for a dog to act like that. But he ended up shaking his head.

"Couldn't have been the same dog."

"Why?" Betty's head lifted quickly.

"Your dog was here last night. The one I found had been dead for a couple of days."

Harry frowned his disappointment. "You're sure?"

"Doggone it," Benson exploded, irked, "'course I'm sure. I seen a lot o' dead animals in my time . . . say," he suddenly added, thrusting his nose belligerently up at Harry, "you act like you *want* that dog to be dead!"

Betty turned away. Harry smiled with embarrassment.

"Well no, not really. But it sure was a pain in the neck. Scared heck out of Betty. It—uh—broke into the house."

"That so?" said Benson with raised eyebrows. And then he added: "Well, hell, ma'am, ain't no dog'll hurt you, not if you treat it right. Couldn't of been mad, you'd've seen that right off."

Betty spun suddenly, remember-

ing. She spoke to Benson with a tight, now obviously worried voice.

"Ed, shouldn't a dog's ears move?"

Benson looked at her blankly.

"I mean," she said hesitantly, "a big dog like that with pointed ears—not ears that hung down, but high, pointed like a cat's. Shouldn't ears like that move? When the dog is looking at you and there's a sound somewhere, the ears should turn toward the sound, shouldn't they?"

"Well, hell," Benson said, his face screwed up in a baffled frown, "sure they move. The dog can't keep 'em still. Why?"

They waited for her to explain, but she looked at their faces and could say nothing. They had not seen the dog, nor the ears . . . nor the brassy eyes. She sensed a horror in all this which she could not impart to anyone, and she knew it. And maybe she was after all just a green, helpless girl from the city. For her pride's sake now she did not say anything. Just then the baby began to cry and she turned and went into the house.

That the dog Benson had found and the dog they had seen were the same was a thing which would not have occurred to Harry in a thousand years. He thought no further than the fact that Benson had said the animal had been dead for two days. That ended it. It also, for a time, ended it for Betty. But not for long. The dog had come after her into the

house. It had opened a locked door. In the horrifying visits of the night before was all the proof she needed that the dog was evil; the dog was danger. But because there was nothing she could say to Harry, to anyone, she went off by herself to think. It occurred to her at last that the two dogs were the same.

Harry, in the meanwhile, passed a miserable day. Little Hal was cutting teeth and wouldn't stop crying. Betty was no help, and when Harry went out into the garage he couldn't find half his tools. He had to put the baby to sleep himself and it was only at the end of the day, as he stood gazing down at the slight woolly mound of his boy, that he was able to regain his smile. *Poor little codger*, he thought. He turned out the light and tiptoed into the bedroom. His smile faded. Betty was awake.

He sat down and pulled off a shoe.

"If that damn thing comes again tonight," he announced dramatically, but with honest feeling, "I will skin it myself."

Betty spoke suddenly from the other bed.

"Harry," she said in a very small voice—the same voice she always used when she had something to say which she knew he would not like—"Harry," will you listen to something?"

He heaved the other shoe. "Sure," he said cheerfully. "Dogs?"

She sat up in bed and nodded earnestly.

"Don't think I'm silly, please, just listen. Don't you think it's funny about the *two* big dogs? I mean, two big dogs, both the same size, both maybe the same kind, both of them new around here, the one skinned and the other a—a prowler?"

He shrugged. Of course it was strange.

"And the way it came into the house and into the garage, and just . . . stood there, watching." She paused, not wanting to get to the point. He waited patiently.

"Well . . ."

He turned to look at her.

"Come on, pet, get it out. What's your idea?"

Her words came out in a sudden rush.

"The skin! What happened to the skin?" she said it with some violence, lifting her eyes to meet his with mingled doubt and defiance. "Why would anyone skin a dog and take the skin. *Why?* What possible reason could there be? And why should a dog the same size, two days later—a dog that breaks into houses and has ears that don't move—why should *another* dog come out of nowhere?"

He stared at her blankly.

"Honey—"

"You didn't *see*," she insisted, "you didn't see the eyes. They weren't a dog's eyes. They were—" she broke off as he stared in amazement. "I don't know," she moaned. "I don't know."

He knelt down on the bed and

took her in his arms. She pushed him away.

"It was the same dog!" she cried, almost shouting. "But the thing we saw was only the skin!"

"Ssh! The baby!" Harry said.

"But it wasn't a dog at all. There was something *inside*."

He sat on the bed not knowing what to say. He had never seen her like this, and the business about the dog was so completely ridiculous that he could not understand her at all. He wished mightily that he had seen the damn thing.

He waited until she quieted—she kept asking him why didn't the ears move—and then reached over to the end table for a cigarette. He handed her one. She pushed it away.

"You won't even think about it," she said with despair.

He made the mistake of trying to be funny.

"But, pet," he grinned cheerfully, "you tell me. What in the sweet holy Hanna would want to crawl inside a dog?"

He did not expect any answer. He could not possibly have expected the answer he got. But she had been thinking and thinking, and once she had believed that the two dogs were the same the rest of it followed.

"Someone . . . something . . . is watching."

He drew a blank, an absolute blank.

Her face was set. "Suppose, just suppose that there really were . . .

beings . . . from somewhere else. From another world. It's possible, isn't it? Isn't it?"

After a moment he nodded dumbly.

"Would they be like people, necessarily? No. Maybe they couldn't even live on Earth. Maybe that's why the saucers have never landed."

At that he jumped.

"Oh now, honey—"

She refused to be interrupted.

"Listen, please. Hear me out. It's all possible. If there are people from some place else and they're different from us, they can't come down, can they? They can learn all about our science, maybe, that we have radios and airplanes. But what can they learn about us, about people? They don't know our language, our customs. From 'way up there they can't really learn anything. They have to come down. They have to come down if they want samples of the real thing."

His grin died slowly. She had obviously thought a great deal about this and had worked it all out. And even if he could not possibly believe all she was saying, he was by nature an objective man and at least he had to admit the possibility.

She waited, watching him. He sat and tried to think it through, to show her where she was wrong.

All she had said so far was possible. Granted. In the morning, of course, in the broad plain dullness of daylight, it would be a lot less

possible. But now in the night he could think about it. There was a warm bed near him and a darkness over the land outside, and a legion of dark thoughts became almost overwhelmingly real.

Aliens. He had a brief, disgusting picture of slimy things with tentacles. But whatever they were—if they were—they would most likely not be able to pass unnoticed among men and women. And there were, so people said, the flying saucers.

Thus the skinned dog.

He followed the logic with an increasing chill.

From above, with telescopes, it could be observed that dogs and cats and a few other small animals seem to pass freely among men without undue notice. How simple then, thought Harry incredulously, to land in some out-of-the-way place—like the mountain—and trap a stray dog. It would be simple to skin it carefully without damaging the pelt, and to insert an . . . observer.

His mind did not waver, it dragged him on.

The observer could be an actual alien—if they were that small—or a robotic device. When the dog had stood so long observing Betty, had it been, perhaps, taking pictures?

Well, this was silly, this was absolutely ridiculous. He was about to say so to Betty when he remembered the tools he had searched for in the garage—tools he had not been able to find.

In the garage.

He rose up suddenly.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back in a minute. By gum, this is the craziest thing I ever heard." He shook his head quickly, unable to suppress a bewildered grin. What if the tools were really gone from the garage? Along with its observing, wouldn't the thing take samples?

He was dressing quickly, laughing aloud at the weirdness of it all, when he heard the sound. It was a faint sliding noise as of a window falling and being stopped. It was coming from the nursery. Betty screamed.

No time for the gun. He leaped past the door and crashed into a chair, wrecking it to get to the door beyond. He tore at the knob, the greatest fear he had ever known boiling and screaming in his mind. He stared agonizingly into the black. Even before he turned on the light he felt the fresh cool breeze from the open window, and a part of him died. Because the thing had been watching to take one more sample—the one sample it would obviously have to take—and he stared with utter horror at the crib.

The crib was empty.

They searched all night and into the morning, but they never found the baby. Not ever. What they did find at last, hung from a bush like an old worn rag, was the empty skin of a large grey and black dog. * * *

DANGER PAST

by James E. Gunn



YOU CAN'T have a murderer without a murder. You can't have a murder without a corpse. There was a victim, but he probably died from natural causes.

And yet it was all planned, cleverly, maliciously. The moment the victim pressed the button, he was dead . . .

Laban pressed the button. The danger was past.

Kyle wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of a trembling hand. He turned away from the clutter of the laboratory and walked through the doorway into the cool, ordered peace of the study.

He sank down into the comfortable embrace of the Twentieth Century pneumatic chair and dialed a bourbon-and-soda on the antique console. It came up slowly through the parting doors, frosty and tinkling. He reached for it eagerly. He poured half of it down his dry throat without stopping.

He lowered the glass to the chair arm and sighed. There was something to be said for the old days. As dangerous as they were—perhaps because of that—people had known how to ease the tension, how to make bearable that constant pressure. Kyle had not dared relax before, but now—

The danger was past. Laban was gone. He would never come back. Kyle had won. He could enjoy it.

Slowly, possessively, he looked around the crowded walls of the large room. Everything here was his:

the shining stones, the shaped and carved metals, the rusty tools, the stained weapons, the dark paintings, the primitive machines. In this room was the wealth of the ages, and it was his. His legacy. Laban had left it to him.

A nice thought, but it wasn't true. Everything in this room, everything in this house, was his because he had risked everything to get them. Twice. Just now and once before with every item. Death had touched him with each one. Death has a cold touch. After a few encounters Kyle got chilled; Laban couldn't understand that. But he had signed the will; in case of fatal accident, the other would inherit. Without that, Kyle had refused to go on.

Everything in the house. Joyce, too. Lovely, greedy Joyce. Laban hadn't understood Joyce. He had wanted her; he had got her; he had used her, like he used everyone else. But he hadn't understood her. He never knew what she wanted. He never tamed her.

Kyle would tame her. The thought brought a smile to his lips. That was one of the things he was looking forward to. Joyce thought she was using him; she didn't know about the will. It would be a pleasant moment when he told her.

Joyce was desirable. Kyle's hands began to sweat as he thought about her sleek, responsive body. Joyce used it well. She had used it to trap Laban. And then, when Laban had

been so blind to her needs, she had used it to trap Kyle. Or so she thought.

"Kill him," she had said. Her voice had been soft in the warm darkness. "Kill him for me."

Murder, Kyle thought distastefully. Joyce was so direct and uncomplicated. Murder had consequences. There were better ways.

Her awakening would be rude and effective. Laban had never realized that Joyce could be beaten. She could be beaten with a golden whip. She wanted that. She wanted to be tamed. And then she would be a delightful, docile wife—or mistress. Which? Kyle hadn't decided. Probably mistress. It would be dangerous if she had a chance to inherit.

Once more Kyle let his eyes roam around the room. As long as this was his, Joyce would never leave.

Laban had been a fool. Laban lived in the past. Kyle chuckled. He was being very clever tonight.

Laban should have converted a little more of this into cash. If he had been a bit more generous with Joyce, she would never have betrayed him. Especially if she had known that it would never be hers if he died—or disappeared.

But Laban had loved every item. Each one was a piece of the past. He would sit in this room, in this chair, for hours, looking at them, not touching them, conjuring up images, gloating over the history that was represented there. And when he

needed money for household expenses or research, when he had to part with a minor relic, he would sigh and frown and delay.

To Kyle they had meant nothing, in spite of the fact that his life had been risked to get them. To Kyle they were wealth, unrealized; power, unfulfilled.

Kyle raised his big, well-muscled body out of the chair and stretched. It was good to be free, free of Laban, free of worries about money and Joyce.

He lowered his arms and held out his hand. It was still shaking. That was a funny thing. He had never trembled on those expeditions into the past. Certainly not afterwards. What was past was past. It could never hurt him.

But Laban had always affected him like that. Laban could look at him with those smoldering dark eyes or speak to him in that low, casual voice, and Kyle would tremble. Tremble how? To take that neck in his hands and squeeze until those eyes darkened for the last time, until that voice was stilled forever.

Kyle could have done it. He had always been bigger and stronger than Laban. But Kyle could never find the courage. And, after all, Laban had been his brother, his wiser, richer brother. And there were the consequences. All his life, Kyle had been aware of the consequences.

Laban had been? Laban was? It was an interesting problem in tenses.

Laban wasn't dead. Kyle had been the last man to see him, and Laban was alive then. Or rather Laban was dead, surely. He was dead at least hundreds of years ago, maybe thousands or millions. And probably he died from natural causes. You couldn't call that murder.

It gave Kyle a comfortable feeling to think of Laban dead. His hands stopped shaking. What was dead was gone. What was past was past. It could never hurt him.

It would have been satisfying to have done it himself, to have seen Laban dead. But it was better this way. There were no embarrassing stains, no incriminating scratches, no accusing body. Kyle shuddered. The law was strict about few things, but one of them was murder. There had been no murder, and Laban was gone. He would never be back. He had died a long time ago, before he was even born.

Laban had always been the clever one. He had learned quickly and remembered everything. He had been inventive, too. His mind had ranged ahead into unexplored fields of speculation and theory, and come back with the Traveller. No one else could have done it; no one else could duplicate it now. Because it was gone, too.

That was a pity. Kyle could have used it. But it was dangerous, and there was no reason for danger now. Danger was past. Kyle had all the

wealth he would ever use; now he could enjoy it. And when people asked him, "What happened to Laban?" he would shake his head regretfully and say, "The machine must have failed; Laban never came back."

It was true. And no one could ever prove Kyle had been responsible.

Yes, Laban had been clever. And he had always gotten everything he wanted. Their parents had always preferred him, the clever one, the little one.

"Kyle! Let Laban have it! He's the little one." Or, "Kyle! You must learn not to hurt your little brother."

How many times had he longed to kill Laban even then?

It got worse as Laban grew up. His cleverness made him wealthy. It got him Joyce.

And what did Kyle have? Nothing. Everything he had ever had, he had worked for. While Laban had relaxed and dreamed, Kyle had worked and risked his life. For what? To make Laban richer. And Laban had been niggardly. He had doled out the money to Kyle and to Joyce.

Laban had been clever, but not clever enough. The doer had beaten the dreamer. Kyle had struck first. And the first stroke had been the last, all that was necessary.

First, because Laban had not been blind. He'd had suspicions. Kyle had felt Laban's eyes studying him curiously, speculatively, and Kyle would shiver and turn, and Laban would look away.

Kyle's plans had been ready for days. His experiences in the past had given him a certain quick readiness of thought and decision. When he had seen the imprint of the Traveller in the dust on the marble floor, he had known instantly what it meant. The machine had been there before. When it arrived, he would not be in it. Laban would.

Only one problem was left to solve: how could he keep the Traveller from coming back? When he had stated it to himself in just that way, the answer was obvious.

Laban had tried to explain the machine many times, but Kyle could never understand it. Analogies helped, but Laban insisted that they were inaccurate.

If time were a river, Laban would say, we would be the boats drifting along with the current, watching the scenery change on the shore. The Traveller, then, would be the boat with a motor, beating back up the river against the current, going backward in time.

Kyle would nod eagerly, and Laban would say, disgustedly, that time isn't a river, and he would branch off into discussions of subjective and objective phenomena, the temporal sense, mathematical formulations . . .

A few things, though, Kyle remembered. The Traveller had two different motors. They were entirely different. One reversed the temporal flow; it took you back in time. The

other speeded it up; that returned you to the present. There was no way to turn the Traveller around in time. The motors were not interchangeable, either, nor were many of the parts. If something happened to the motor that returned you to the present, you were stranded.

That was to make Kyle careful.

No, Kyle couldn't get anyone to fix it. No one in the past could understand it and not very many in the present. Even Laban, if it happened to him, would have trouble if it was more than a broken connection, if some part had to be replaced. The technology of the age would be useless; he would have to do it all himself, and the smallest repair would take him years. Unsuspected or rare minerals would have to be located or refined or manufactured and combined in intricate detail which Laban could only find by hit-and-miss improbability. Here in the present he got his parts ready-made; he only put them together.

But Kyle did not need to worry. If he did not come back on schedule, it would be a simple matter for Laban, with the facilities of the present, to put together a new machine and come to his rescue.

The Traveller, of course, had never failed. The motors were fool-proof, and Laban had been a careful craftsman. Kyle had never worried. Not about that. He wasn't the type to worry about machinery; he took such things for granted. The expla-

nation had been almost forgotten until he needed it. Then Kyle worked fast and secretly.

It had been simple to remove the vital motor. The only need for caution was in concealing any traces of tampering.

Kyle had removed the panel carefully. He clipped the wires and pulled the motor out. He had been surprised that it was so small and light. He had held it easily in one hand. He had replaced the panel and smashed the motor to bits before he tossed it into the junk drawer. No one would ever be able to analyze it. He had taken all Laban's notebooks and drawings and shoved them in the electric furnace. In a few seconds there weren't even any ashes.

The motors could not be duplicated. Laban would not be rescued.

The real difficulty had been to trick Laban into making the trip. After the first few experiments, Laban had turned that part over to Kyle. Let Kyle do the work. Let Kyle risk his life. Laban had selected all the goals, the times, the places. He would prepare intricate schedules and timetables.

"Go here; go there," he would say. "Do this; do that. I want the Seal of Solomon." Or the sword of Charlemagne or the Coronation Crown of Queen Victoria of England.

And before Kyle got into the machine, Laban would set the dials for

the date and the time of day and the place. The time was always just before the object was recorded as disappearing or being destroyed. That was important, he would say. The past was fixed. It could not be changed. If Kyle tried to take the things earlier, he would fail. Perhaps he would be killed. He would drill Kyle in the timetable for hours. Then Kyle would press the button, and the rest was up to him.

From that last trip, Kyle had returned shaking. It was not from fright, or from seeing that peculiar square in the dust on the marble floor of the National Archives Exhibition Hall. But Kyle had turned the trembling to good account. When the time came he refused to go back.

"I've got to have those documents," Laban had said impatiently. "The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights. You've got to go back."

"It's impossible," Kyle had said firmly.

"But the place is deserted," Laban had insisted. "You have all the time you need."

"All the time I need." Kyle shook his head. "They're in the cellar. A fifty-ton vault. Walls fifteen inches thick. Five-ton armored doors. Bombproof, fireproof, thiefproof."

"Anything one man makes, another can break. You know who said that? The man who built the vault. And we have tools and techniques

he never suspected. And time. Washington is evacuated for the bombing. In a day or so, those documents will be destroyed by a direct hit. If you hadn't lost your nerve, you'd have had them on your other trip."

"Time, time." Kyle's voice was shaking. "Sure, you can sit here safely and talk about time. But it's something else to be working there in that deserted building, working in the dark, waiting for that bomb to fall, waiting for the bomb that leveled Washington. Give it up, Laban. It isn't worth it."

"Worth it!" Laban's eyes were smoldering. "Those fabulous pieces of paper! Look, Kyle!" His voice became low and persuasive. "I've been trying to tell you. We'll set you down this time before your previous trip. Then there can't be any danger."

"And what if I'm still there at the time I arrived before?"

"I keep telling you," Laban exploded. "It can't happen. You can't be in two places at the same time. Neither can the Traveller. I could explain the theory to you, but you wouldn't understand."

"Understand!" Kyle gritted his teeth and shivered. It wasn't hard to pretend fear. Excitement and dread were scorching and chilling him inside. "I understand this. I'm not going."

Laban sighed and shrugged. "All right," he said mildly. "I'll go myself."

Fool! Fool! Kyle had thought ex-

ultantly. *The clever Laban makes his fatal mistake.*

And it had happened just like that. Laban got into the square, lattice-work car, checked the assortment of tools, instruments, and explosives, and set the dials. He didn't bother to check the Traveller; that always worked. It would now: one-way.

Laban nodded casually to Kyle. "It shouldn't take me more than a few hours, six at most. Be here in the laboratory in six hours. There's something I want to talk to you about."

Kyle nodded and thought, *I'll be here, Brother, but you won't. You can't come back, but I'll be here. I'll enjoy that moment. I'll think about you there in the dusty Exhibition Hall, pressing the button again and again, and taking off the panel in a wild panic, and seeing the empty space where the motor should be, and understanding. Understanding instantly, with that quick, clever mind of yours, that you can go back as far as you like but you can never return. You've enjoyed living in the past; enjoy it now. You have mastered time, and now time has mastered you. Time and I.*

It's funny thinking about time. I'll stand here six hours from now and think of you and your panic and your understanding, but you will be dead. As soon as you push that button you are dead. You'll have run out of time. You'll have died hundreds or thousands or millions of years ago, and

maybe I'll wonder how far back you went before you gave up.

You've got something to talk to me about. I wonder what it is. I'll always wonder. Do you plan on returning early and laying a trap for me? Have you, too, thought of murder? Or do you only intend to tell me that we're finished, that we've worked our way up through time, that we've stolen all its treasure, and now we're through?

I don't need you any more, brother Kyle. Good-by. Good luck.

You're too late, Laban. You're pushing the button, and soon your treasures will be mine. The treasure in the downstairs study, and the treasure upstairs, waiting for you with hate in her heart. There! You push the button. The car flickers out like a candleflame, and you are dead.

The danger is past.

Kyle picked up the drink from the arm of the chair and drained it. He wondered how far back Laban had gone. He pictured him, standing silent in the darkness, desire for revenge burning inside, and knowing he was helpless. There was no time for revenge. There was only time to die.

It must have been a difficult decision for Laban. Stay or go back? To stay was to give up immediately. But the farther back he went the greater difficulty he'd have in adjusting himself to conditions. Would he stay or go back and back, searching

for legendary civilizations that might have reached peaks of technology great enough to repair the Traveller? There were none. Kyle had searched.

Quite a problem, and Laban, with all his cleverness, could not solve it. The past was fixed. It could not be changed. Laban said that himself. His only decision was how to die. And he was dead.

As long as Kyle kept reminding himself of that, he felt all right. But it was hard to think of Laban dead. Kyle had seen him alive just a few minutes ago. And then Kyle would tremble.

He wandered around the room. There would never be another moment like this feeling alive with his victory, swelling with the first full glow of possession. Soon he would go up to Joyce, but first he would enjoy this. He had sown the seeds with his daring; now the harvest was his. He stared at the treasures, ranged in chronological order around the walls, and remembered the risks each had entailed.

That painting of the woman there. The one with the gentle smile. Laban had sat for hours, just looking at it. He'd had a place all ready for it.

"Hang it there, Kyle," he'd said. No thanks. No praise.

Those pre-war days had been busy ones. Here, there, everywhere were treasures about to be destroyed. The painting of the woman had

come from a Paris museum, Kyle remembered. He had dressed in the uniform Laban had provided. It was identical to that worn by the guards who were moving the paintings to a safe place. He had taken the picture, not to the truck that was going to be destroyed but to the Traveller.

And far down the wall, almost at the end, that stone ax, the crudely chipped, misshapen stone roughly lashed to a stick. Kyle walked to it and stared at the brownish stain on the stone. He remembered how it had got there.

A brute man had been digging up the stubborn dirt with a crooked stick. He had stopped to talk violently with another man. He had grabbed that ax hanging by his side and smashed the other's skull with it. And then, with unsuspected sensitivity, he had dropped the ax beside the body and backed away, mumbling, before he turned and trotted clumsily into the trees, glancing fearfully back over his shoulder.

If there was any truth in the old legend, it might have been Cain killing Abel.

Kyle felt a kinship with that brute man. They both had killed with the weapon at hand. They had killed someone close to them. The only difference was that Kyle felt no remorse. He could not be caught.

He had picked up the ax and brought it back. He looked at it now, at the brown stain that Laban

had not washed off. Kyle would have liked to have used it on Laban, with that same passion and violence. He should have. Then he would have known Laban was dead, with a certainty he could not feel now.

Impulsively, Kyle took the ax down from the wall and swung it in his hand. It had a nice feel to it, a balance he had not noticed before. He made it whistle viciously through the air.

Kyle winced. He looked down at his hand. A drop of blood was welling redly from his palm where something had punctured the skin. He turned the handle over. Something glittered in the light. It was a needle, sharp, stained now like the stone. There was a small slit in the handle from which it had sprung. Inside was a tiny spring.

Kyle stared at it stupidly. The brute man could not have put it there. He did not know the secret of metal.

Laban!

Not before he left. *After.* Inexorably the truth pressed in upon Kyle. He saw Laban going back through the centuries, stopping at every one of the places and times Kyle had stopped, planting deadly little devices in each of the things that Kyle would take.

Laban would be patient. No time? He had all the time in the world. Laban would be thorough. He remembered everything.

The needle! Was it poisoned?

Kyle felt nothing except the gentle throbbing of the little wound.

That drink! No. Kyle had not brought the console back. Laban had bought it. And he could not have known before he left. He could only have known when he stood in the darkness and felt the empty place beyond the panel.

Kyle's eyes were wide and staring as they raced around the room. Everything here was his. And everything was untouchable. Wild ideas chased themselves through his mind. He could avoid the traps. Gloves. Instruments. He could hire someone.

But it was useless. There would be bombs there and guns and knives and skin poisons and incendiaries. Even if he could sell them without being killed, someone else would die, and Kyle would be blamed for the death. No one could touch him for what he had done, but he would surely be punished for what he had not done.

Some of them would not be dangerous. Laban would want to prolong his agony as long as possible, to make him suffer.

But any of them could be deadly. Laban himself had handled some of them, and he had not died. Which ones? His eyes flitted from one precious object to another. Which was bomb? Which was poison?

Stop, Laban! Stop!

But Laban was dead, millions of years ago. The danger was past, yet Kyle whimpered. * * *

Me Feel Good

by Max Dancey

SPACE SHIP MEN good. Smart. Eat. Gurgle. Make smoke. Say much word.

Me no smart. No man learn me smart, eat, gurgle, make smoke, say much word.

"But how was this man able to keep alive on that asteroid?" Captain Sir say. "Nothing to eat, no water, no air. Almost absolute zero. Just cold, and bare rock, and a smashed ship."

Navigator say: "The others kept alive for a while on the ship . . . Still, this guy was a baby when they crashed." He look me. Make sick face. "It's a lucky thing for you we came along, boy . . . But God knows how you're going to make out on Earth."

"Hey, Captain," Mate say, "he's hot!"

Me no hot. Me no cold. Me me.

Mate hand box. "Hotter'n a blast tube," Mate say. "Look at that neon! Wait a minute, I'll turn on the audio count."

Mate click box. Box make beep beep beep. Quick beep. Man look me. Me feel funny. No hot. Funny.

Captain Sir say me: "When did the others die?"

What me say? When? *When?* *Die?* Some go. Some stop. Mamma say: "I wish I'd never been born." She go. Daddy say: "I guess the danger isn't you, son. It's in the rest of us, in all of Man . . . But I wish I were dead." He stop. Me tell Captain Sir? No.

Mate say: "He doesn't understand most of what we say. But look at his face when we talk. Looks like he's storing away every word . . . I don't like the ugly little monkey."

Navigator say: "How would you

**THIS FELLOW DIDN'T KNOW HIS OWN STRENGTH,
WHICH WAS LUCKY FOR THOSE WHO HAD THE LITTLE JOB OF
GETTING HIM SAFELY DOWN TO EARTH, SO TO SPEAK.**



like to have grown up marooned and alone on a forsaken asteroid? It's a miracle he's alive . . . Does he have to be pretty, too?"

Mate says: "So I didn't grow up on an asteroid. And I wouldn't have liked it. And I'm not pretty myself . . . But look at him—. And if I did look like him, I wouldn't expect you to like my looks."

"I don't anyway," Navigator says. Mate face gets red. "Captain," Navigator says, "what shall I do with this ore sample?" Small rock.

Captain Sir no say. Mate say. No nice say. Small rock go. Poof. Me feel good. Navigator say: "Eeeee!" Navigator say Mate: "You—" No nice. "I wish I had you in a ring with some gloves on!"

Mate gone. Poof. Navigator gone. Poof. Me feel good.

Captain Sir say: "Hunnh?" Look me. "Did you see them vanish? Just like that?" Captain Sir look. Jump. Look. Go locker. "Just like that!" Captain Sir hot? "I need a drink . . . Gone, by. God! Just like that!" Captain Sir gurgle bottle. "Navigator and Mate gone. Damn funny!" Gurggle bottle. Push wall, make big beep.

Man come. Man come. Man come.

Captain Sir say: "The Mate and the Navigator are gone, gentlemen . . . Gone."

Much say.

Captain Sir say: "The Navigator and the Mate had a little argument. The Navigator said he wanted to face the Mate in a boxing ring. They both vanished. You figure it."

Man say: "Hah! . . . I'd like to see that fight." Man gone. Poof. Me feel good.

Captain Sir say: "That's what happened, men. I don't have to try to convince you now."

Much say.

"I think," Captain Sir say, "that this—. This—." He look me. "This man we picked up on the asteroid—. Or maybe the asteroid—." Captain Sir gurgle bottle. Man gurgle. Man gurgle.

"Three of us left," Captain Sir say. "But the Navigator cut the tape, and the Mate had it rigged in. We'll get to Earth all right on the autos."

"Maybe so," Man say. "But I wish I were safe on Earth now." Man go. Poof. Me feel good.

Captain Sir gurgle bottle. Man gurgle. Look me. Me no gurgle.

Man look me. Say: "I wish I'd signed on the Martian Queen, I know that." Man gone. Poof. Me feel good.

Captain Sir say: "I'm not going to drink any more. Not now. Not ever. I'm sober. I'm God-fearing." Captain Sir shut eye. Captain Sir open eye. Captain Sir look me.

Me feel funny. Me no learn. Man say go, man go. Me say go, me no go. Me no learn. Man say go, me feel good.

Captain Sir say: "How do you do it?" Captain Sir mad. "How?" Captain Sir mad.

Me no say. Me no learn. Mate say me stupid. Me stupid.

Captain Sir hit head. "I don't know why I'm worrying. You like to make people get their wishes, eh? How about me? I wish I had a million dollars."

Dollars? Green come. Hit Captain Sir. He fall . . . He no mad. Captain Sir funny. Ha-ha. "I got it! A million bucks!" Captain Sir say: "You go to Earth, boy, and make everyone happy . . . I wish I was home with this money." Captain Sir gone. Poof. Me feel good.

Me go Earth. Feel big good. . . .

Escape! They would escape from this regimentation and mediocrity.

Lawson grinned at the vacuous faces of the throng. He was looking upon the farce called civilization for the last time. It was their world, this thing he loathed. Let them have it, the nameless mass of happy nonentities; let them live with it and die with it. Tomorrow he would be free.

And then Adam Endicott slipped out of a cross-walk and caught desperately at Lawson's sleeve. "The police raided the cellar, Lawson!"

The dream began to die. "When?" Lawson whispered.

"Twenty minutes ago."

"How many—?"

"Nearly all of us. I broke away and ran to warn you. Madge hadn't come yet."

"We'll have to find her and get out of the city fast. There's still a chance—"

"For only three of us?" Endicott laughed sourly.

"One man can pilot a ship."

Lawson and Endicott took the high-speed slide-walk from the clanging, cluttered industrial area to the suburbs on the outskirts. Tall apartment spires were set in green parks. The glass-like walls of the buildings reflected the red of the dying sun. Hordes of noisy children crammed the playgrounds beside the apartments, and the park walks were filled with brown-uniformed workers returning from the five-hour afternoon shift in the city factories.

Lawson and Endicott cut across the lawn toward the block-three buildings where Madge Brown, as an unmarried woman, was granted a single apartment.

"She may not be here," Endicott said. "I tried to get her on the television right after the raid and I couldn't."

"Then we'll wait," Lawson answered. Madge Brown meant as much to him as his dream of escape. He knew that; yet it was a strange infatuation, for until four weeks ago he had not known her. Madge had been the last to join the conspiracy.

"It was an inside job," Endicott told him grimly.

"One of us blew the story to the police?"

"It's obvious. They knew just how to find the cellar; they knew exactly when we were going to be there."

Lawson fingered his lip thoughtfully. "I suppose they'd have had me, too, if I hadn't been held up waiting for the slide-walk out of the plant."

"That's how I got away—because I was late."

"But we all believed in the same thing, Endicott. For two years we've been planning this together!"

"Most of us, Lawson."

"You don't mean—?" Lawson stopped and faced Endicott with clenched fists. "Not Madge."

"She's the only one who didn't show up at the cellar."

"You're wrong! She hated this world as much as we do."

"So she said." Endicott licked his lips. "I know how you feel, Lawson. Sometimes the truth hurts. What do we really know about her? Madge Brown—just a dame you picked up one night in a recreation block. We took her in on your say-so. But who is she? Where'd she come from?"

Suddenly the words sang in Lawson's soul with the tinny jangle of hysteria. It was more than he could take, to lose his faith in Madge and the dream of escape simultaneously. His fist shot out, lashing Endicott's jaw. Lawson turned and ran blindly toward the walk in front of the block-three apartments.

From the lobby he rang her apartment, but the televue remained blank. While he waited in the booth, he heard the distant cry of a police siren. Fear clutched at his mind. How could the police have traced him here so soon?

Considering the cumbersome inefficiency of this world it was impossible. There would have been a dozen bureaucratic forms to fill out first. Endicott must have called the police. It was Endicott, then, who had betrayed the conspiracy, not Madge.

Lawson got the picture, then—or thought he did. Only Lawson and Madge had escaped the police raid, and Endicott was using Lawson to lead him to Madge, since no record of addresses had been kept. Clearly, Endicott had to present the police with a clean sweep before he was paid the Judas fee.

Lawson left the apartment lobby. He had more chance to evade the police in the park outside. Across the lawn beyond the playground he saw the police van, its black panels turned to fire in the sunset light. Two gray-uniformed officers, armed with neuro guns, were pushing Adam Endicott into the cage.

Lawson darted into the shrubs that sheltered the walk. He stood watching the arrest, helpless with impatient hatred. Lawson was unarmed and superstitiously awed by the dreaded neuro guns. No citizen could legally possess a weapon—and the handful which the conspiracy had managed to acquire had been lost in the raid on the cellar. There was literally nothing Lawson could do to save Endicott. The van doors banged shut. Now Lawson knew beyond any possibility of doubt that it was not Endicott who had sold out to the police. And that left only Madge.

Only Madge! Lawson saw the police officers help her out of the cab. They walked with her to the apartment building. As they passed the shrub where Lawson was hidden, he heard her voice distinctly,

"... and there's only one more—Jimmy Lawson. He'll show up at my apartment, I think. I'll bring him in myself."

The full weight of the truth crushed Lawson's soul with a kind of numbing fury. For a moment he felt nothing. He saw Madge enter the lobby and, by instinct, he crept

away across the lawn. When he came to a walk, he began to run. He ran without direction or destination until his lungs were screaming for relief and pinpoints of fire hung before his eyes.

He dropped panting on the grass. He had come to the edge of the parkland and the suburban area of the city. Below him, beyond the fringe of trees, were the bright lights and the crowded slide-walks of the industrial area. On the roof of a factory building he saw a faded campaign poster, forgotten for almost two years. It was tattered, but still the grinning face of Kim Rennig was visible in the smoke-blue reflection of city lights.

Rennig, Madge and the conspiracy: they swam together in a nightmare, without ending and without hope. From the deep well of his bitterness, Lawson abruptly remembered the beginning of his dream of escape.

At first the dream was Lawson's alone. But it was by no means original with him. As recently as forty years ago the sleek sky cruisers had still soared up from the space port beyond the city. It was only after the gray-uniformed dictatorship had been clamped tight on the world that the government had rigidly supervised interstellar flight, and finally prohibited it entirely.

The government claimed that the population had been seriously de-

pleted by colonization flights which had robbed each generation of its strongest, its most ambitious and intelligent men and women. But Lawson never accepted that explanation. The real truth, as he saw it, was that the colonization of the infinite empty worlds of the universe presented a constant invitation to freedom to the dissatisfied and the oppressed. The gray dictatorship could not really control the home world so long as any man with a smattering of initiative could escape. Consequently, all possibility of interstellar flight had to be cut off.

That happened with the election of Kim Rennig to the planetary presidency two years ago. It was not that Rennig—a mild-mannered, emotionless man—was in any way personally responsible. He simply represented the ultimate end of a trend, and he had been elected by an overwhelming vote. The opposition, speaking vigorously for freedom, for man's right to colonize where he chose, to grow as much as he dared, had not polled quite five per cent of the ballots.

"How can people be such fools?" Lawson demanded when the final election returns flashed on the wall screen in the factory where he worked.

"Because we're afraid." The answer came from one of the blank-faced nonentities in the throng: the slight, stooped man Lawson later knew as Adam Endicott. As the

crowd broke up and the workers went back to their machines, Endicott added, "The average man is always disturbed by change, and the colonies represent an unknown constant, of change. We don't know where they are or what worlds they may be building. They're cut off from us and that makes us feel we've lost a part of ourselves."

"Don't tell me," Lawson sneered, "that these idiots who elected Renning went through that involved reasoning."

"Of course not. They do it by instinct."

"And destroy freedom by default!"

"Freedom is an abstract. It means nothing to most of us."

"You're taking this as if it had nothing to do with you personally."

"What else can I do? It's impossible to escape now."

"Not impossible," Lawson replied slowly. "We still have the power of cosmic energy and the sky ships. All we need is initiative and—"

"And a star chart," Endicott intervened dryly. "When you figure out how to break into the government vaults, let me know."

Lawson's dream of escape began with that conversation. For days on end he mulled over the factors of the problem. No legal prohibition of interstellar flight could have been effective except that all galactic charts were possessed by the government and the science of astronomy had

been a bootleg subject for a quarter of a century. There were thousands of sky ships lying abandoned on deserted fields; anyone with a small outlay of funds could have built one.

Five centuries earlier the harnessing of cosmic radiation, in a machine as simple to make as a crystal radio set, had put interstellar flight into the hands of the common man. No longer had the exorbitantly expensive three-stage rockets been necessary. Cosmic power automatically eliminated the government control and financing of space flight. The adolescent boy, once happy with his noisy hot rod, began to build space flivvers to explore the dry deserts of Mars. The family down the street took a Sunday ride beyond the troposphere and vacationed in the asteroids.

Within a generation man learned to key his new-found energy to a speed just short of the speed of light. And humankind overflowed into the universe. Every crackpot who could attract a handful of disciples went to build a new world after his own pattern. By the thousand other groups left to make more stable societies. Sometimes, for a decade or more, communication was maintained with the home world. But the universe was infinite and the colonies were so widely scattered that any continuing form of union was impractical.

Lawson looked upon the period of free-for-all colonization as the high

point in man's creative genius. He was certain that the gradual tightening of controls paralleled a cultural decline, and the prohibition of space flight marked the death of civilization. There was no alternative except to escape from a world that had chosen, in indolence and ignorance, to destroy itself. The only thing he needed to make his escape was one of the government charts of the universe; without it—and without a knowledge of astronomy—no cosmic-powered ship could be piloted to a pinpoint destination in the vast emptiness of space.

Yet Lawson was quite undisturbed by the fact that the charts were sealed within a vault more carefully guarded than the treasury. The gray-uniformed dictatorship, tangled in its endless net of bureaucratic forms, was hopelessly inefficient. A determined man could break into the vaults before the ponderous machinery of government could bestir itself to stop him.

Lawson's primary concern was to recruit colonists who thought as he did. Carefully he sounded out the men and women he knew. Within six months he found twenty followers—all as young as he was and as idealistic. They met in an abandoned cellar in the industrial district and they liked to consider themselves the first spark of conspiracy against the dead-weight mediocrity of the gray dictatorship.

The number of converts increased

steadily, as new members of the conspiracy spread the word to their friends and brought them to the hidden cellar. At the end of a year, when more than a hundred eager citizens for the new world-to-be had been recruited, Lawson met Adam Endicott again. It was in the white-tiled coffee automat, where Lawson went for his fifteen-minute break in the five-hour afternoon shift he worked in the factory. Endicott dropped on the booth seat opposite Lawson, smiling his recognition.

"Still dreaming of escaping from your fellow fools?" Endicott asked.

For a moment Lawson was shocked—and frightened—at having his dream spoken of in a crowded public space. Then he saw who it was, and he countered with another question, "Do you still want to join me?"

Endicott shrugged. "Any time you show me a sky chart—"

"We don't have that—not yet. But I've something almost as good." Lawson's voice dropped to a stealthy whisper. "A genuine textbook in astronomy. We stole it from the library archives. Nobody ever caught on. This government's too lazy to inventory its own books."

A flame of hope flickered behind the cynical mask of Endicott's lean, hungry face. "So you really mean it." He held out his hand. "It won't work; it can't work. Escape is impossible. But I'm with you all the way."

After Endicott joined the conspir-

acy, his sardonic probing, his incisive cynicism, shifted the emphasis from starry-eyed discussions of the projected escape colony to practical plans for creating it. The recruiting of colonists stopped, and the conspirators hammered out the details of an ideal government. It was largely a government of negatives. They knew precisely what they did not want—the cumbersome bureaucracy which crushed their world—but it was considerably more difficult to visualize the positive legislative forms they would need.

"That we can work out later," Lawson said confidently. "It will depend partly on the environment of the planet we colonize. The important thing for us to agree upon now is the extent to which we must limit the government. In our world the individual must have maximum freedom. Government must never be allowed to regiment our lives or imprison us again in mediocrity."

All the colonists spent a great deal of their time studying the stolen text in astronomy. At the space port near the city they located a large, abandoned cruiser that would meet their needs when the time came to escape. At night they worked in small groups refurbishing the interior. They carried supplies, in small quantities, past the gray-uniformed field guard and secreted them aboard the escape ship.

During the second year they managed to steal half a dozen neuro

guns from the police. They could never make an open raid on the city arsenal, because that would have given away the conspiracy. For the same reason they could not attack isolated police officers patrolling their beats in the factory aisles or on the city slide-walks. So that the loss of the guns would seem to be the result of a natural accident, the conspirators periodically tied up slide-walk intersections at the peak of the rush hour when the factory shifts were changing. They did this by tampering with the machinery in the bowels of the city—slight damage which the repair crew could take for a normal breakdown. When the police tried to straighten out the temporary confusion caused on the street level, conspirators in the milling mob managed to drive the dull-witted emotions of the nonentities close to panic. They arranged for the gray-uniformed patrol to be caught and trampled in the turmoil. And, in the process, the police lost their weapons.

It was a very slow way to acquire arms, because the mechanical breakdowns could be organized only at rare intervals or the government might have become suspicious. But the conspiracy required relatively few neuro guns. They would be used only once, on the night the chart vault was raided.

When the last of the supplies had been carried aboard the cruiser, the date for the raid was set for a month

in the future—when the rotation of the vault guard would increase the chance for success. The final act—escape—was within their grasp, and Lawson's dream was nearly a reality.

That knowledge acted upon Lawson like a drug, intoxicating his senses and blurring the rigid self-discipline he had held upon his thinking for two years. Where once he had been outspoken against the gray dictatorship, he had forced himself to conform; he had made himself, in public, a bland imitation of the vacuous fools he observed around him.

But for the moment, when he knew escape was within his grasp, Lawson's self-imposed restraint was gone. He wandered alone in the city, reveling in his hatred and drunk on his dreams. He wanted to see it all—that bumbling world he despised—and to sneer at its absurdities.

He walked through the factory district, where the first night shift was working in the blue-lit buildings. *A five-hour work shift*, Lawson thought. It was enough to give man freedom for all the creative impulses he had ever felt. That much the gray dictatorship had given them—that and economic security. Regardless of the work a man did, his income and his living conditions were much the same, within a very narrow range. Yet how had the fools frittered away their freedom?

There might have been a Renais-

sance of art, poetry, music, drama. Instead the people flocked during their free time to the great recreation blocks. They sat munching on insipid confections and watching the lush 3-D love dramas. Or they ate soporific banquets in the gilded halls, or drank endlessly at the mirrored bars. Sporting contests, too, were watched in 3-D restorations of the great games of the past; no one participated. There were gyms, pools, and game courts in all the recreation blocks; no one ever used them.

Man had made himself flabby-muscled and witless. For that, too, Lawson blamed the gray dictatorship. The government built and maintained the glittering recreation blocks and encouraged the people to use them. Amusement had been transformed into a drug to keep the world placid and easily managed.

From his early childhood Lawson had belligerently used the gyms and pools in the recreation block. He enjoyed the physical activity. He had a boundless energy that few others in his world seemed to possess. It disturbed his parents that he was so different from other people. They were desperately concerned at what the neighbors might think. But Lawson gloried in the difference. He was proud of his physique, vain in the knowledge that with one hand he could have crushed his scrawny, flaccid companions. His parents spoke so often of his embarrassing idiosyncracies that Lawson left home in his

teens and took a job in a city factory. To do so meant that he had to sacrifice his right to attend the government university, but education under the dictatorship had no appeal for him.

On the night when the conspiracy voted to raid the chart vaults, Lawson walked slowly through the throbbing industrial sector and went to a recreation block on the edge of the suburb. For a time he wandered in the thronged bars and banquet halls, laughing in his soul at the dull-witted pleasures of his fellow men. From the back of an auditorium he watched a part of a 3-D love thriller until the ridiculous posturing of the heroine began to churn his viscera with nausea. Angrily, he went into the empty natatorium, stripped off his brown uniform, and plunged naked into the clean, cold water of the pool.

As he came up, refreshed by the long, gliding dive beneath the surface, he saw a pretty brunette watching him from the side of the pool. For a moment his nakedness embarrassed him. Disposable plastic trunks were always available in the dressing rooms, but Lawson seldom bothered to use any because he had always been alone in the pools. Then his embarrassment became boastful belligerence. What did he have to be ashamed of? Let her see a real man for a change.

Very deliberately he began to swim the length of the pool. He

heard a splash in the water behind him, and the pretty brunette was in the water with him. She knifed past him, with a clean, powerful stroke, and turned at the end of the pool to smile into his face.

"I've always wanted to do it myself," she laughed, "but I could never quite get up the nerve."

And that was how he met Madge Brown. Their mutual affinity was immediate. She preferred to use the gyms and pools in the recreation blocks, as he did. That made her different in the same way that Lawson was different. Until he met Madge, he had never realized how lonely he had been, wedded to the abstraction of a dream and a hatred.

When they left the pool, they went to the lounge for a snack. He found himself telling her of his cherished hope of escape. It was a dangerous admission to make to a stranger, but he was certain it was safe. Lawson was sure he knew Madge Brown as well as he knew himself. Within an hour he had told her about the conspiracy, and the next day he asked the others to accept her as a recruit.

They found it impossible to investigate Madge as they did every other new member of the conspiracy. She told them that was to be expected, since she had just moved to the city from another some miles to the south.

"At home I was bored," she said. "I lived with nothing but fools. I thought it might be different here."

Adam Endicott was unwilling for her to know the details of the conspiracy until they had learned more of her background, but he was a minority of one. Lawson persuaded the others to accept her because he vouched for her. After all, it was fantastic to be cautious where Madge was concerned. Lawson knew her and that was enough. She was enthusiastic for his dream and surprisingly helpful; she was a government secretary, working for the security office, and she knew a way into the chart vault that would allow the conspirators to by-pass the outer ring of guards.

Yet one point of view, which she expressed repeatedly, puzzled Lawson. "It's a wonderful thing to escape, Jimmy—but think how much more we could do if we stayed right here."

"These fools had their chance. They turned it down when they elected Rennig."

"Of course. First, you have to teach the people to want a revolution."

"This is their world, just the way they have made it. Let them die with it."

"That's not the point, Jimmy. Don't you see their problem is ours, too? We're all human beings, with the same faults. If we could solve the problem here, we wouldn't need to run away."

"We're not running away; we're escaping from a graveyard to build a better world."

"Then why couldn't we do it here?"

To that one he never had an answer which satisfied even himself. The dream was to escape; anything else was a weakling's compromise. Lawson couldn't put that feeling in words, and he always countered her question with one of his own. "What makes you talk so much like a government propagandist, Madge?"

"But I don't, Jimmy; I don't!"

It amused him that the suggestion flustered her. He could never understand why. Madge was no spy; Madge would never betray the conspiracy; her thoughts and her reactions were too much like his own. He believed that; he believed it implicitly until the end—until he saw Madge with the gray-uniformed police officer outside her block-three apartment spire. "There's one more," she had said. "I'll bring him in myself."

Lawson lay on the grass at the edge of the parkland looking at the factory buildings of the city, gleaming bright against the night sky. The hatred burned out of his soul in the searing flush of guilt. It was his fault the dream had failed. He had destroyed the others by trusting Madge. How could he have misjudged her so grossly? Why hadn't he seen that she was only acting a part?

That could not be true. Madge's hatred for the gray dictatorship was as real as his, her wish for a finer

world as genuine. No degree of acting could have conveyed such sincerity. Then why had she betrayed them?

At first Lawson thought of revenge. He would go back to her apartment and kill her with his own hands. It would be easy. She expected him and she didn't know he knew the truth. Lawson actually got up from the grass and began to cut back across the park toward her apartment spire.

But gradually his footsteps slowed and stopped. Revenge was a personal emotion, entirely pointless. The dream deserved better than that. Whatever happened, Lawson could not save himself. In a matter of hours the gray-uniformed police would close in on him and, without a weapon, he was helpless. He accepted that as the hazard for opposing the accumulated weight of mediocrity. In the time that was left to him he wanted to make a gesture of some sort, something spectacular enough to encourage any other captives of regimentation who dreamed of escape.

He knew, suddenly, what he must do. The sky cruiser was on the abandoned space port, ready and waiting. Lawson would take it up alone and without the sky charts. He would be lost in the infinite emptiness, a mote forever riding the beams of cosmic energy. He had little chance of stumbling upon a world where he could survive or of finding one of

the older colonies. The flight would be suicide. But no one would know that. In the city they would see the waterfall of fire as the ship arched upward through the stratosphere. The people would know that someone had broken free of the gray dictatorship. To those who dreamed, the trail of fire would be an encouragement and a hope—perhaps enough to make them attempt escape.

From the park Lawson took the slide-walk to the fringe of the city, riding the fast-moving center lane. Beyond the circle of suburban apartments, the city decayed rapidly. There was a broad area of deserted homes, long unoccupied because the city population was much smaller than it had been generations before. Every city on the planet was bordered by a similar fringe of empty buildings and untended parks. Lawson took the decay for granted, since he had never lived with anything else, but he considered it a bitter symbol of the death of his world.

The slide-walk came to a turnaround in an empty station, where the windows were filmed by decades of accumulated grime and the ornamental gilt was flaking from the stone walls. Beyond the station was the two-level express highway winding across the rolling, green farmland. Here and there on the white road Lawson saw the lights of produce vans moving toward the city.

There were no other vehicles on the road. Lawson would have been

surprised if he had seen one. The people in the cities did not travel. They were uninterested in seeing the physical beauties of their world, although scores of pleasure cars were available for their use in the city storage yards. Early in their lives the people settled into their ruts: a five-hour work shift, with the rest of their day devoted to the sterile pleasures of mechanical amusements. They were content to live and die with that; they had no ambition to achieve anything else.

In a valley just outside the city lay the old space port. A bright, crescent moon, just rising above the horizon, revealed the high, wire walls and the round hulks of the abandoned sky ships. Far away, in the old, flat-roofed terminal building, there was a feeble light, burning for the convenience of the guards who patrolled the field. It was a small guard, merely a token reminder that space flight was forbidden. A stronger force was not necessary, for as long as the sky charts were locked



in the government vaults not even a moronic fool would think of taking a ship into the trackless void of space.

Lawson slipped into the field through a gully beneath the electrified fence. It had been dug by the conspirators when they carried supplies to the sky cruiser. The cruiser was the largest hulk on the field, an enormous disk of rusting metal overgrown with weeds and vines. Although the interior had been cleansed and refinished, the conspirators could do nothing to the outer hull or their work would have been discovered by the guard. Yet they had tested the metal and found it entirely sound. The rust was an ugly blemish, but the long period of neglect had not seriously damaged the cruiser.

Cautiously, soundlessly, Lawson wormed his way across the field. He entered the cruiser by the fuel chamber, partly buried in the hard earth, and pulled himself through the narrow emergency corridor into the spacious living quarters of the disk. He fumbled in the darkness for the door of the control room.

Suddenly he heard the sound of breathing close behind him. A hand shot out and closed upon his. Lawson responded by instinct, swinging his fist blindly through the seething darkness. He hit something soft. A man grunted. There was a scuffling of feet on the metal floor. Fingers clawed at Lawson's chest. He broke

the grip and jerked open the door of the control room.

A pale blue light came on in the corridor. Lawson saw three men in the gray military uniforms. So they had been waiting for him here. He should have expected that. Naturally Madge would have told them about the ship.

As they drew their weapons—old-fashioned pistols, not the devastating neuro guns—Lawson darted toward the control panel. All he had to do was jerk down the power lever. The ship would catch the cosmic transmissions and rise into the heavens. Nothing mattered after that. The men could kill him then, for the ship would be aloft, riding the floodtide of radiated light.

"No, Lawson. No!" one of the men screamed. "Madge sent us! You must understand—"

A second man fired his pistol, not at Lawson but at the curving glass of the control panel. The bullet ploughed through the delicately interlocked wires of the power receiver. Sparks flashed. Tubes shattered. Flames leaped up from the fuel chamber at the center of the disk.

The cabin rocked and the three men were thrown off balance. Lawson sprang at the nearest man, grappling for his gun. It should have been easy. A dozen of the flabby nonentities would not have been a match for him. But, surprisingly, the muscles beneath the gray uniform were hard and lithe. A fist smashed Law-

son back against the shattered panel.

Through the arching view window of the cabin Lawson saw guards streaming across the field from the terminal building. They were carrying white lights that bobbed in their hands as they ran. Lawson's three assailants saw them, too. Inexplicably they turned and fled from the cabin, in such haste that one of them left his pistol forgotten on the floor.

They darted across the field, firing at the terminal guard. Lawson heard the sound of pistol shots, and he saw the silent probe of the energy beam as the guard replied with neuro guns. In a moment the fighting had moved beyond his range of vision.

Lawson glanced at the ruined panel. The cruiser receiver was smashed; the ship would never rise again from the abandoned port. Once more Lawson was defeated. "Madge sent us," the gray-uniformed man had said—as if that were a magic formula that made anything all right!

Lawson stooped and picked up the pistol. Except in museums, he had never seen one before. All shell-firing weapons had been replaced long ago by the more efficient neuro guns, which fired a paralyzing beam of energy created by a combination of radioactive elements sealed in the leaded handle. The neuro-gun monopoly had always been rigidly controlled by the government. Except for half a dozen closely guarded technicians, no one knew precisely what gave the

gun its power; and it was instant death to remove the leaded handle to experiment.

The ancient pistol lay cold and hard in Lawson's hand: a new kind of power. It gave him a strange sense of confidence. He no longer felt naked before a guard armed with the neuro guns. With a pistol that spoke the ultimate finality of death, he could invade the government headquarters and the chart vaults. The soft, gray men would run before him in fear.

Smiling grimly, he slid out of the cruiser, went past the burned-out wreckage of the fuel chamber. Far away across the field Lawson heard the continuing sounds of the conflict between the guards. And that puzzled him. Why should they fight among themselves?

As he squeezed through the gully under the fence, he heard the whine of a motor on the express highway. A police van screamed past him. The three men in the cab were the same who had tried to trap him in the cruiser. Behind them a chaos of alarm sirens sounded over the space port.

Lawson took the high-speed slide-walk back toward the heart of the city. As he moved through the suburbs, he heard sirens again, from scattered points in the city. He had no doubt that the guard had reported his escape, and now all the police of the gray dictatorship would be after him. But the last place they would

look would be the government center. Lawson's heart soared with the anticipation of victory. He could release his fellow conspirators and still escape to his dream.

He left the slide-walk at the government center and stood for a moment looking up at the facade of the buildings. There was a light in the jail and the hospital, and lights blazed from the lecture rooms of the city university. But the rest of the center was dark.

Stuffing the pistol into his belt, he moved slowly toward the yawning, open doors of the jail. The tiny, landscaped square in front of the center was deserted. In another hour it would be thronged as students left the night classes in the university. Lawson's confidence increased; even time had played into his hands.

Then, suddenly, a black police van screamed to a stop on the plastic-surfaced road beside the jail. The cab door banged open. Lawson saw Madge Brown running toward him, a pale shadow in the moonlight.

"Jimmy!" she cried. "Don't be a fool! Come with us!"

He saw that she was armed with a neuro gun. He drew his pistol and fired at her, but missed. The sound of the shot echoed like thunder over the silent square. He turned and ran toward the steps of the jail. Guards tumbled through the doors, blocking his way. The beam from Madge's neuro gun caressed them and they dropped where they stood.

Why had Madge saved him? Lawson had no time to consider a logical answer. He sprang up the steps, into the ornate hearing room. He heard Madge call out behind him,

"Jimmy, come back!"

Guards came at Lawson from all sides, confused and uncertain of themselves, not quite sure what to do. Lawson waved his pistol. It meant nothing to them, for they had not seen it destroy a sky ship. Lawson pulled the trigger. The bullet smashed into the wall, fragmenting the plastic ornamentation. Frightened, the gray-uniformed men backed away, reaching for their neuro guns.

Lawson swung toward the door. Madge was on the steps. Once again she sprayed the mob with her gun. Lawson clawed at a door in the side wall. It swung open. He caught a glimpse of the cell block.

It was empty—empty, except for a handful of dissolute drunks serving out sentences for disorderly conduct. The conspirators were not in the city jail.

Lawson's mind reeled. None of it made sense. He turned toward Madge, an agony of doubt in his eyes. She faced him with a neuro gun leveled at his chest.

"Now will you come with us, Jimmy?"

Dumbly he followed her out of the station to the black police van parked on the road.

"You're the toughest recruit I ever

corralled," Madge said, as she climbed into the cab beside him. The gray-uniformed driver put the van on the express highway leading south out of the city.

"Recruit?" Lawson repeated.

"For our revolution," she answered coolly. "I told you before, Jimmy, we can't run away; we have to solve our problem right here."

"That's impossible, Madge. Rennig runs the planet. We don't stand a chance."

"No?" She smiled. "You remember, I mentioned that I came here from another city. That's where I'm taking you now; that's where I sent your men this afternoon. That city already belongs to us. We're ready to take over another one, when we find enough recruits. Revolutions aren't necessarily violent, Jimmy. We simply adopt the forms of this world—as you see, our people use the police vans and the gray uniforms—and make them our own."

"It isn't worth it, Madge, for these nonentities, these fools—"

"They are children of men who dreamed of escape long ago. Escape is impossible. Colonization skims off the best of a world and leaves mediocrity behind. And in a generation or two—if the colony survives—it faces the same problem."

"That isn't true! If you build a world on genius and on ambition—"

"It is still a human world. We carry our faults as well as our virtues with us. What we have to learn is

how to build a workable civilization for all of us together. Running away only postpones the problem; it doesn't solve it." She paused and her voice became very gentle. "You see, Jimmy, I know I'm right, because this world is a colony, too."

He felt as if she had struck him with a club. "No, Madge," he whispered. "This is the Earth—the home world. We've always believed that."

"I said I worked as a government secretary, Jimmy. I do, when I'm out recruiting for the revolution—which is what I was doing when I found you. I've seen the old documents in the archives. Rennig and his bunch of fools may not know what the records mean; perhaps they've never bothered to read them. But I did. This is a colony founded by men from the Earth centuries ago. They ran away to create a better world. They did their best. And this is the result. That's why I know the running has to stop. We can't escape a thing that's a part of ourselves; it's time we solved the problem."

He sat silent beside her. There was no reason to doubt what she said; his dream had been foolish and childish—he realized that without bitterness—and, as he discarded it, he found another to take its place: the more stable dream of maturity.

As a city came into view on the horizon, he took her hand and said, "We'll make this our kind of world, Madge; we'll rebuild here. And tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow our children must build for themselves, their sort of civilization and not ours. It must always be that way, Jimmy. We can never find perfection, but to grow constantly toward it—that's the only dream worth having."

After a silence, he asked, "Madge, how did you know you'd find me at the government center?"

She was surprised. "Why, you called me on the televue—"

"Called you? No, Madge."

"The connection was poor and I couldn't bring in your face, but I was sure—" Suddenly she laughed. "You're joking, aren't you, Jimmy?"

He had no time to reply, for the van came to a stop in the square of a new city, and they were surrounded by a noisy, jovial crowd. The sight of a city that was so alive with the energy of hope and creativeness was so new to Lawson that he forgot the tiny detail of the question neither he nor Madge could have answered. It hardly seemed important. It belonged to the mediocrity of yesterday—to a dead world. Lawson had suddenly regained the living.

In a campus room, high above the government center of the city Jimmy and Madge had left, three elderly professors met anxiously with Kim Rennig. They were concerned, too, about the garbled televue call; it was the only small detail where their interference might have been detected.

"It doesn't matter," Rennig assured them, in his weak, emotionless voice. "She found him and got him out of the city; they won't try to escape again."

"We've kept them here; we've kept their revolution," one of the professors added with satisfaction. "That's what counts. No colony will get our best brains and our non-conformists this time. We've given the Earth a chance to grow again."

"It was touch and go for a while," Rennig admitted. "The thing that did the trick was the misinformation we planted in the archives. The forged papers convinced Madge Brown and her friends that this was a colony, not the Earth itself; and on that basis she concluded that escape was futile."

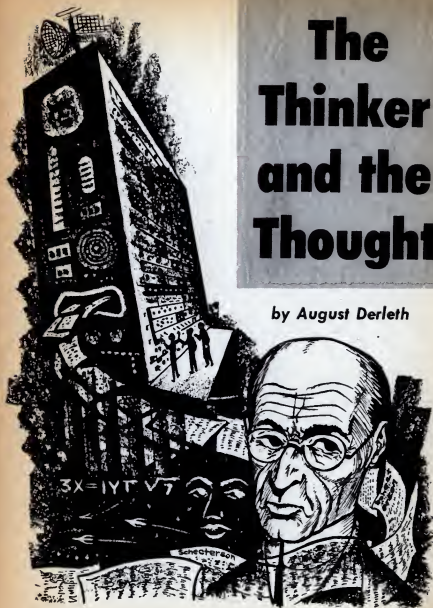
"The Earth has spawned the universe," one of the professors said. "It's time we looked out for ourselves. In two or three generations, perhaps, we'll be able to lift up our heads again and be the equals of our brilliant offspring."

"If this revolution doesn't sink back into the comforts of conformity," another added.

"It won't," Rennig assured them. "We've made the dictatorship their challenge, rather than the stars." He said very softly, "No more the stars, but man himself: that's the problem we've given them. As long as we exist, the challenge does too. And by the time they destroy us, they will have transformed the world." • • •

The Thinker and the Thought

by August Derleth



**THIS IS TRUE: MAN'S POWER TO ACHIEVE THE
FINAL VICTORY IS LIMITED BY HIS CAPACITY TO ENJOY IT.**

TEX HARRIGAN paused before a window filled with miniature machines. "Gadgets always make me think of Professor Richards," he said.

"Who's he?"

"Was. He's dead. You'd find him in my file of queer people, if I ever got around to putting it together. He was an inventor, in a modest way, after his retirement from the faculty of Harvard."

"No less?"

"No less," said Harrigan.

"What did he invent?"

"A machine. A thinking machine."

"Oh, no!" I laughed. "What next? Do you remember when it was perpetual motion?"

Harrigan smiled. "As a matter of fact, computing machines are functioning machines in our civilization. You ought to remember Bessie—Bessel Functions, to you—which was put together for nuclear physics and trigonometric problems back in 1944. Bessie was the first of them, and quite a primitive machine, compared to some of those which came after, like Mark III and Mark IV. But those machines were strictly calculating machines, wonderfully helpful when it came to problems concern-

ing rocket motors, atomic fission and the hydrogen and cobalt bombs, whereas Professor Richards' machine was somewhat different. He called his Mark VII. He meant it to think in fields other than mathematics."

"And did it?"

"According to Richards, it did. How could I know? I mean, a reporter can't have any definite knowledge of that kind. Oh, he could, but it's rare."

Harrigan led the way to a tavern and hunched over the bar.

"Richards, now, didn't seem so queer when I knew him first. He was on the faculty at Harvard then, and I was on the *Boston Almanac*. It was only later on, when he retired, that he began to get more and more fanciful. He always began his theories on perfectly sound scientific grounds, and branched off into pure fantasy. He was hipped up on Mark VII for some time before he turned his hand to it. He figured that if the calculating machines functioned so well in the pattern of the human brain, a thinking machine in other veins could be perfected.

"Gadget crazy," I said. "Our entire civilization has been affected."

"Well, now, I don't think I'd go so

far as to say that. I wouldn't call Bessie or Mark III a gadget. Huge, complicated machines. Respectable scientists hold that they think. It depends on what you mean by thinking. If you say that thinking is judging present information by past experience, as the brain does, why, then, the calculators think. The machine has relays and vacuums, comparable to neurons. The machine has wires; the brain has fibres. Both brain and machine respond to impulses, and both have memory."

"Of a sort, I suppose."

"I'm not qualifying it. Richards didn't, either. He set to work to build his machine. It was a long, slow process, naturally, and he worked pretty much by himself. I used to run into him rarely at the University Club, and listen to his theories. He was a solitary; that is, he preferred solitude. But there's something about an old student, I suppose, that always enlists a professor's interest. It was that way with Richards. He recognized me and it wasn't long before I caught on to what was in his mind."

"What did he expect to accomplish?"

"Just what his goals were, I don't think he himself knew. He wanted a machine that could think like a man."

"A superman."

"Of course. What would be the good of a machine which couldn't think any better than the average man?—who doesn't think at all, if it

comes right down to it. It wasn't that Richards especially made a confidante of me; he just relaxed and talked. He had a fellow-scientist who got a little closer to his secret. Old Max Radford. We used to compare notes, especially after Radford began to think Richards was losing his mind."

"A natural conclusion."

"If you agree that we all tend to think the other fellow's crazy when he comes up with an original idea, yes. Otherwise, no. Each case ought to be investigated on its own merits, not on somebody else's prejudices. Richards' idea was sound enough."

"What happened to the machine?"

"Why, he built it."

"And then?"

"I wish I knew exactly what happened then. Something did. He perfected it late one night in spring—a machine that could do everything he expected a superman to do, even to the extent of doing a kind of rudimentary talking. It could say things like 'Good morning'—a quirk of Richards'. I imagine how delighted he was that first night . . ."

He was trembling a little when he pushed the button.

There was a tremendous rushing and roaring sound, which fanned out and up and died away into a flat, "Good morning, Professor Richards."

That it was ten forty-five at night

did not trouble him at all. The machine would adjust itself. What now? To which problem would he turn the machine for its first essay? But, of course, it must be something relatively simple, which he himself knew, so that he could check its findings with ease. He gazed fondly at his creation with myopic eyes behind dark-rimmed spectacles. An astronomical problem.

He fed the machine the equation. Given a man traveling in one second with the speed of light in one year, how long would it take him to reach the outermost rim of the mapped, pre-Palomar cosmos?

The machine whirled and roared into action, all its complex parts, almost a million of them, playing a role in the solution of the problem; its glass sides gleamed in the glow of the lights from above; and presently the electronic typewriter connected to it began to function. The answer was there.

Sixteen years. It would take a man, traveling in one second at the rate of light in one year, sixteen years to reach the outermost rim of the mapped cosmos in pre-Palomar days, before the installation of the 200-inch telescope, which extended the cosmos still more upon the astronomical maps.

He sat down with a sigh of relief. The machine purred and was still. He did not dare challenge Mark VII further, though he well knew that the problem the machine had just

worked out had been simple for Bessie years before. There was time. He hesitated to confess to himself that even now the worm of doubt gnawed at him; he was afraid to discover that, after all, perhaps, Mark VII could not do what he hoped it would be able to accomplish.

First, of course, it must build up its memory. It must acquire the equivalent of racial memory and experience. For a time he would have to feed it a progression of problems, becoming increasingly complex.

Only then would he dare to branch into other fields.

He looked longingly at the speaking-tube which was the beginning of his own contributions to what had been invented before. Would the time come when he might simply propound a question by voice and have it answered?

He edged over to the tube, took hold of it, and, on impulse, asked, "Is there any practical value in algebra as taught in secondary schools?"

The machine whirled into life once more. There was a tremendous to-do of gears, levers, and the hum of electronic impulses which spoke for the machine's life. And, at last, the typewriter rattled out the machine's answer.

"There is no practical value in algebra except for specialized students. Algebra should be removed as a required subject and become an elective. The same is true of geometry, advanced arithmetic, trigonometry

and calculus. At best, one required course covering the essentials of all subjects could be taught."

Being a methodical man, Professor Richards did not give vent to his pleasure. How could the machine have answered such a question? It was an imperfect thing, he knew. Nothing was perfect under heaven. But it was possible that somewhere within its extremely complicated mechanism there might be a sensitized reflector, something sufficiently sensitized to mirror his own thoughts. The concept made him uneasy, but it remained a distinct possibility. The machine had not yet told him anything which lay outside the boundaries of his own knowledge and convictions.

"I had to call on him one night to ask some questions about a colleague whose loyalty was then under investigation," Harrigan went on. "Routine stuff, of course. Richards showed me his machine. Now, I'd seen Mark III at Harvard, and I had some idea of how the thing worked, with questions being fed to it in the form of holes in a paper tape, or reduced to binary numbers and fed in on the principle of an adding machine. Richards' machine wasn't quite like that. Perhaps it differed as much from Mark III as that machine did from the adding machine, which was certainly its ancestor. The difference between those earlier machines, apart from the greater simplicity of

the adding machine, was that the adding machine needed separate commands—that is, a button had to be pushed for each part of the operation and its conclusion—and Mark III functioned independent of anything but an operational button or switch. Richards' machine dispensed with a great deal more, it seemed to me."

"For instance?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I couldn't put the differences into words. I don't even know, basically, what makes its ancestors function as well as they do. And, you understand, I don't know yet that Mark VII was everything that its inventor claimed for it. Some intermediate steps that had been eliminated—I could see that.

"Well, the calculating machines are huge, complicated affairs, and Richards' was no exception to the rule. He had torn out one floor of his house part of the way so that it could be accommodated; even so, it was crowded. I looked it over carefully; it didn't look too different from Mark III except that it had a mechanical voice-box, and a great many more gadgets.

"I heard it speak, of course. That was elementary. Then Richards asked me to set it a problem. Not too difficult a one. But it needn't be mathematical, he said. So I asked it by means of the speaking tube what would happen if I turned in my copy late three or four times. I could hardly make it simpler."

"What happened?"

"The machine came back with 'Stephenson would fire you.' So I reasoned, as logically as I could that there was some device in connection with the machine which could pick my thoughts. I hadn't mentioned the managing editor; neither had Richards. The machine brought him into it, but he had existed in my thoughts. It made a kind of sense.

"But how had the machine done it? And, beyond that, how had Richards done it?"

"Do you mean that the machine talked to you?" I asked.

Harrigan shook his head. "No, the answer came through on that electronic typewriter. I expected it to, since I'd seen Mark III work out complicated equations about nuclear fission on its typewriter; so I wasn't surprised at that. But an equation, after all, is a different thing from the propounding of a problem in economics or philosophy or what have you.

"Mathematics is, in its fashion, an exact science; a machine could conceivably function admirably within its boundaries. But this wasn't an exact science. And Richards had got some crazy kind of logic into it.

"I asked him to explain his work, but he either wouldn't or couldn't. I gathered that he was a little puzzled by his creation himself. But he was still feeling pretty good about it and did a little wild talking about solving

a lot of problems which had been bothering mankind for ages."

"The usual thing, isn't it?"

"Sure. You get these highly educated boys who shake on their balance, and almost every time it comes down to solving the problems of the universe. That was what I figured had happened or was happening to Richards.

"Well, Richards went a little farther while I was there. He knew what I was after about Professor Byington; so he simply asked the machine, and the machine came through with the answer: Byington had once unwittingly belonged to a subversive organization, but he himself was completely loyal to the United States. Well, now, that was clearly Richards' opinion, combined with some knowledge he had, and it was also beginning to be my own opinion; I'd turned up the organization, and Byington claimed he had been corralled with other big-wigs during the war, and that made sense.

"'All right,' I said to Richards. 'What's the gimmick?'

"He tried to explain, but all the time I had the feeling that he really didn't know himself..."

It was approximately six months later that Mark VII suffered a nervous breakdown.

Professor Richards came home one night from a faculty party at the University Club to encounter a steady throbbing and grinding and

meshing issuing from the machine. The noise met him outside the door and drew him precipitately to the machine.

Mark VII was brilliantly lit and working away in a frenzy. Beside the typewriter lay a sheaf of paper.

Bewildered and alarmed, Richards efficiently shut off the current. Mark VII sputtered and went silent, but not without gasping, "Good evening, Professor Richards."

"Good evening, Mark," Richards answered automatically.

Then he went around to the sheaf of papers.

The machine must have been functioning for at least two hours. There were no less than seven separate papers. Richards read the top line of each monograph, one after the other, with a sense of nightmare.

"The Kinsey report neglects certain psychic aspects of the night-life of the average American woman's mind . . .

"The principal inhabitants of Venus do not, as popularly supposed, bear any resemblance to man, but are more closely related in form to molluscs, and on certain days are able to move in the heavy, humid atmosphere of that planet by a mode of propulsion closely related to swimming . . .

"The proposition for the elimination of war as an instrument of policy on the planet Earth is one utterly unrelated to reality, since the most highly-developed animal, man, is

grotesquely at variance with himself in the basic developments of his various growth patterns . . .

"The entire science of mathematics is based on the acceptance of the fundamental hypothesis that the digit one is the primary unit, failure to accept which, however, collapses the entire structure of mathematics, astronomy, music . . .

"What proponents of the theory that women as a sex do not reason with the clarity of men fail completely to realize is that women are capable of arriving at the same conclusions as men do through rationalization by an unique process of intuitive perception . . .

"The entire system of education in America is based on the fundamentally erroneous credo that equality of opportunity equals equality of education, which is basically false and will ever be since great numbers of people are irrevocably uneducable . . .

"The planet Earth has been under observation from other planets, notably Mars and Venus, for some centuries, and the snail-like progress of its highest civilization duly noted by the inhabitants of those planets . . ."

Thereafter Professor Richards sat down to read the papers through with undeviating interest. Some of them were of considerable length, since the electronic typewriter was not hampered by human limitations and could record appreciably faster for Mark VII than it could for any human hands.

What Richards read astonished him out of all bounds. Mark VII had parrotted no thought of his own this time. Indeed, he had been far away, out of its ken, presumably.

He halted himself abruptly. "Ken," indeed. Mark VII had no "ken" in that sense.

Or did it?

A horrible doubt began to gnaw at him. He gazed at the machine for a long time before he got up and cautiously completed the connections once more.

The lights came on, the machine whirled into life, the mechanical voice said, "Good evening, Professor Richards," and the smashing and throbbing resumed, as if nothing had happened in the interval.

The electronic typewriter began to clack and Richards hurried around to see what was being written. He had removed the last paper before the machine had finished. Now it simply took up where it had left off.

Richards read, "... and the entire furore caused by the so-called 'flying saucers' or 'flying discs' arose from a fundamental misconception of the problem and carried through in logical sequence along patterns of thought long ago determined by habit, to which the human animal is more essentially a slave than is supposed ..."

Richards ran around the machine and once more broke the connections.

He stood for a moment breathing

heavily, gazing at his machine as Frankenstein must have looked upon his monster. What had he created in Mark VII? Was this, too, a monster?

The machine was silent. Its very silence seemed to mock him.

"Next time I saw him," Harrigan went on, "I could see that it was the beginning of the end for him. He looked haunted."

"'Haunted?'"

"Well, you know what I mean. A way a man has of seeming to be looking over his shoulder for someone on his trail without actually doing so. Richards looked that way. At the same time he had thinned down considerably, his face was haggard and gaunt, his clothes bagged on him. His voice was lower, almost a whisper, as if he feared that he was being overheard. He scarcely noticed me when I bumped into him on the street. I caught hold of his arm.

"'Professor Richards,' I said. 'Don't you remember me?'"

"'Oh, yes. Mr. Harrigan,' he answered.

"His voice was as lifeless as a phonograph, and considerably more impersonal than the telephone.

"'How's Mark VII?'" I asked.

"'Oh, he's fine,' he said.

"'What problems has he been solving?'" I asked.

"He gave me a funny look; it's hard to describe. I couldn't determine whether he was being deliber-

ately lugubrious or whether he was grimacing to express something else.

"Did you ever know that the location of the Garden of Eden was not in the Tigris-Euphrates region, or anywhere in Arabia, but in the Mayan country of South America?" he asked.

"I said I knew nothing about it.

"Fact," he said. "He says so. And did you know that the inhabitants of Mars are virtually bodiless as we understand body, that their locomotion is a kind of floating progression, and that they are not, as supposed, a dying race?"

"Oh, come," I began to protest.

"He shook his head. 'There cannot be any doubt about it, Mr. Harrigan,' he answered. 'Mark VII has demonstrated his accuracy beyond cavil. Oh, and even more. For instance,' he went on in his low, half-whispered voice, 'America is destined to become a matriarchy soon—very soon. There will be a woman president, and a majority of women will occupy Congress. Can you conceive of anything more frightening?'

"To a bachelor, perhaps," I came back at him. "As a matter of fact, though, the women couldn't do any worse than the men, and they might do a great deal better."

"Ha! that's what you say. But not according to *him*."

"And what does he say?"

"Atomic warfare is inevitable," Richards replied. "And not over persecuted minorities, not over en-

croachments on alien territory, not over incidents of war—no, sir, but over whether fashions shall be dictated by European or American centers. There's one consolation, however—the women will fight it; the men will stay home."

"The whole thing had the air of something out of Gilbert & Sullivan. There we were on Boston Common talking about Richards' thinking machine as if it were a real, living entity, capable of flights of thought beyond those of mere mortals."

"But it wasn't, of course?" I put in.

"How could it be?" countered Harrigan. "Admittedly, it had some kind of sensitivity. I had seen that. But it couldn't reject anything that wasn't there in the first place. So much I had seen. I didn't know how Richards felt about the Garden of Eden or the inhabitants of Mars, but, granting that the machine actually came up with some of those answers, it was a cinch that he was a confirmed misogynist and couldn't abide the thought of women in public office. So the machine simply reproduced his own prejudices. There wasn't anything out of order in that."

"Except Richards himself."

"Yes, except Richards. It was plain as a pikestaff that he was getting more unbalanced and that he wasn't long for this world.

"Well, I walked along with him for a couple of blocks, listening to the damndest rigmarole you ever did hear. It seemed that the machine

worked night and day, if he didn't break the connection, and that he apparently had no control over it. What was developing in his house was a kind of warfare between him and the machine. He had begun to think of himself as Frankenstein, and Mark VII as Frankenstein's monster.

"I felt sorry for him, but, of course, he might have seen it coming. The whole idea of a thinking machine, as he saw it, was an impossibility."

"But you saw the machine yourself, Tex?"

"Sure, I saw it. I saw it work. But it's a cinch I didn't see anything like Richards said he was experiencing.

"The end, however, wasn't very far off. About a week or so. He looked about half dead when I saw him that day on the Common."

"He died?" I asked.

Harrigan nodded and called for another drink. "Have another?" he asked me.

I nodded.

"Yes, he died," Harrigan went on. "The city editor sent me out on the story and I got there ahead of the other reporters, but not by much. Richards had been a pretty important man on the faculty for many years, and his death was news in Boston. Some of the boys had to go around and get the usual statements of regret from well-known people with whom Richards had been associated and so on, but I got the body.

"A cleaning-woman had found him not far from the machine.

"He was still lying there when I came in, and the place was a shambles. The police didn't know what to make of it. First of all, Mark VII was smashed to pieces. It looked as if Richards had done his best to wreck the machine beyond any attempt to put it back together. No one ever made the attempt, for that matter. There were plenty of computing machines and no one had taken Mark VII seriously on Richards' terms.

"Richards had shot himself."

"He'd been ill?"

Harrigan tapped his temple. "Up here, yes. It was the craziest thing you ever saw. There were all those papers from the machine—or supposedly from the machine. The cops were trying to make some sense out of them, but they were pretty much over their heads. All except what must have been the last one. That was clear as a pikestaff. Richards had apparently taken it up, read it, and gone berserk."

"What in the world was it?" I asked.

Harrigan chuckled. "Why, it was nothing more than a beautifully worked out chart of all the diseases of which Richards was likely to die, with a logical argument showing him that there was no reason for him to keep on living. That was what must have been in Richards' mind, and the machine simply picked it up.

"Poor Richards had so much faith in his machine that he believed it. Every silly word of it." * * *

THE IMAGE of the

WHEN THE SHOWDOWN CAME, A BRAVE BAND

OF REBELS FOUND THEY HAD SOME FRIENDS.



GODS

by Alan E. Nourse

IT WAS nearly winter when the ship arrived. Pete Farnam never knew whether the timing had been figured out that way in advance or not. Also, he never knew whether or not there was any connection between the ship's arrival that year and the fact that the colony had been predicting its first real bumper crop. After it was all over, Pete and Mario and Tegan and all the rest hashed it out six ways from Sunday. And none of them knew, for sure, what had happened back on Earth, or when it had actually happened. They just had too little information to go on. All Pete Farnam really knew, that day, was that this was the wrong year for an Earth ship to land on Baron IV.

Pete was in the field when the ship landed. As usual, his sprayer had gotten clogged—tarring should have been started earlier, before the weather got so cold that the stuff clung to the nozzle and hardened be-

fore it got settled into the dusty soil. The summer had been the colony's finest in the fourteen years he'd been there—a warm, still summer with plenty of rain to keep the dirt down and let the *taaro* root in deep, and grow up tall and gray against the purple sky.

But now the *taaro* was in, packed and compressed and crated, ready for shipping, and the heavy black clouds were moving nervously across the sky, going faster with every passing day. Two days before, Pete had asked Marigny to see about firing up the little furnaces the Dusties had built for them to help fight the winter. All that remained to be done for the year was tarring the fields, and then buckling down beneath the wind shields before the first storm struck.

Pete was working hard to get the nozzle of the sprayer cleaned out when Mario's jeep came roaring down the rutted road from the village in a cloud of dust. In the back

seat a couple of Dusties were bouncing up and down like happy five-year-olds. Pete was twisting a jammed valve with his heavy, powerful hands when the brakes squealed.

Mario's voice bellowed at him from the road. "Pete! The ship's in! Better get hopping!"

Pete gave him a wave and started to close up the sprayer. One of the Dusties tumbled out of the jeep and scampered across the field to give him a hand. Although it was an inexperienced hand, the Dusties were so proud of the little they were able to learn about mechanized farming that nobody had the heart to chase them away. Pete watched the fuzzy brown creature get his paws good and stuck up with tar before he had to be pulled loose and sent back to the jeep with a whack on the backside. Pete finished the job himself; then he grabbed his coat from the edge of the field and pulled himself into the front seat of the jeep.

Mario spun the little car around and started back into his own dust cloud. His dark face was dirty and his beard was getting long for the winter, but now there were lines of worry around the young colonist's eyes. "I don't like it, Pete. The ship isn't due this year—"

"What time did it land?"

"About twenty minutes ago. Won't be cool for a while yet."

Pete laughed. "Old Schooner is just getting thirsty for a taste of that Scotch I save for him," he said.

"Maybe he'll have some cut plug for us. Maybe even cigars, who knows?"

"Maybe," said Mario without conviction.

Pete looked at him and shrugged. "We should yell if they're early. Maybe they've found a new way to keep our dirt from walking off on us this winter." He stared at the fields, at the heavy windbreaks that had been stretched across in long, jagged curves in the hope of outwitting the vicious winds that howled across the land during the long winter. Pete picked bits of tar from his beard and wiped the dirt from his forehead with the back of his hand. "This tarring is mean," he said wearily. "Glad to take a break." He started picking cakes of the black stuff from his fingers.

"Maybe Cap Schooner will know something about the rumors we've been hearing," Mario said suddenly.

Pete looked at him sharply. "About Earth?"

Mario nodded. "Schooner's a pretty good guy, I guess. I guess he'd tell us, wouldn't he, Pete? If anything was wrong on Earth?"

Pete nodded and snapped his fingers. One of the Dusties hopped over into his lap and began gawking happily at the long fields as the jeep jogged along. Pete stroked the creature's soft brown fur with his horny fingers. "Maybe someday these fellas will show us where they go for the winter," he said. "They must have it down to a science."

Somehow the idea was funny and both men roared. If the Dusties had anything down to a science, nobody had discovered what, so far. Mario grinned and tweaked the creature's tail. "They sure do beat the winter, though," he said.

"So do we. Only we have to do it the human way. These boys grew up in the climate." Pete lapsed into silence as the village came into view below them. The ship had landed quite a way out. It rested on its skids on the long shallow groove the colonists had bulldozed for it years before, the first year they had come down to Baron IV.

Slowly Pete turned Mario's words over in his mind, allowing himself to worry a little. There had been rumors of trouble back on Earth—rumors he had taken care to soft-pedal, as Mayor of the colony. But there were things that were strange: like the old newspapers and magazines that had been brought in by the lad from Baron II, and the rare radio message that would be relayed so far out they could get it. Perhaps there was ground for unease.

But Captain Schooner and Pete had seen eye to eye for a long time, and he'd always welcomed the Captain's visits, however short, and whatever year they came. True, they were few and far between. The colony was small; it didn't require but one supply ship in three or four years. And at that the *taaro* crates from Baron IV wouldn't half fill up

the ship. There were other colonies far closer to home that sent back more *taaro* in one year than Baron IV could grow in ten.

But when Captain Schooner got his ship down there was fresh food from Earth, meat from the frozen lockers and maybe even tobacco and a little candy and salt. And always, for Pete, there was a long evening of Scotch and palaver with the Captain about things back home and things on Baron IV.

Pete smiled to himself as he thought of it: things back home. It seemed so incredibly remote to him, now. He could remember Earth, of course—the green fields and the blue sky that he had missed so much in his early days at the colony. But thoughts of Earth were far off now. Baron IV was home to him, and he knew he would never leave it. He had too many hopes invested here, too many years of heartache and desperate hard work, too much deep satisfaction in having cut a niche of humanity out of a dusty, hostile world, to ever think much about Earth any more.

Mario stopped in front of the offices, and one of the Dusties hopped out ahead of Pete. The Dustie ran across the rough gravel to the door, pulling tar off his fingers just as he had seen Pete do. Pete followed and then stopped before the door, a frown creasing his weatherbeaten face. There should have been a babble of voices inside and Captain

Schooner's loud laugh roaring above the excitement. But Pete could hear nothing.

A chill of uneasiness ran through him. He pushed open the door and walked inside. A dozen of his friends looked around at him silently, then nodded and mumbled, and looked away from the man sitting in the chair. Pete glanced around the room and his eyes met the Captain's, and Pete knew something was very wrong.

It wasn't Captain Schooner. It was a man he'd never seen before.

The Dustie ran across the room in front of Pete and hopped up on the desk as though he owned it, throwing his hands on his hips and staring at the Captain curiously.

Pete took off his cap and parka and dropped them on a chair. "Well," he said. "This is a surprise. We weren't expecting a ship so soon."

The man at the desk inclined his head stiffly and glanced down at the paper he held in his hand. "You're Peter Farnam, I suppose? Mayor of this colony?"

Pete nodded slowly. "And you?"

"Varga," the Captain said shortly. "Earth Security and Supply." He turned his eyes toward the small, frail-looking man sitting beside him in civilian clothes. "This is Rupert Nathan, of the Colonial Representative Service. You'll be seeing a great deal of him." He held out a small wallet of papers. "Our credentials,

Farnam. Examine them carefully, please."

Pete glanced around the room. John Tegan and Hank Marigny were there, their faces uneasy. Mary Turner was watching the proceedings with her sharp little eyes, missing nothing. Mel Dorfman stood like a rock, his heavy face curiously expressionless as he watched the visitors. Pete reached out for the papers, flipped through them, and handed them back with a long look at Captain Varga.

He was younger than Captain Schooner had been—far younger. He had sandy hair, clipped short and graying about the temples, and his pale eyes looked up at Pete from a soft baby face. His face was clean shaved, and his whole person seemed immaculate as he leaned back calmly in the chair. His civilian companion, however, had uneasiness written in every line of his pink face. His hands fluttered nervously, and his eyes avoided Pete's.

Pete stared at the men, and his hand went up toward his tangled beard. Self-consciously he stopped in time and reached into his blouse for a cigarette. Beards had their uses in a climate like Baron IV had. His would be good and thick by the time winter struck. But these clean-shaven puppies had never spent a winter on Baron IV.

"The papers say you're our official supply ship," he said to the Captain. "We're surprised to see you, but an

Earth ship is always good news." He clucked at the Dustie, who was about to go after one of the shiny buttons on the Captain's blouse, and the Dustie hopped over and settled on Pete's knee. "We've been used to seeing Captain Schooner."

The Captain and Nathan exchanged glances. "Captain Schooner has retired from Security Service," the Captain said shortly. "You won't be seeing him again. However, we have a cargo for your colony, Farnam, and I think you'll like it. You may send these people over to the ship to start unloading now, if you wish—" His eyes swept the circle of windburned faces—"while Nathan and I discuss certain matters with you here."

Nobody moved for a moment. Then Pete nodded to Mario. "Take the folks out to unload, Jack. We'll see you back here in an hour or so."

Mario's eyes shot to the Captain, and back to Pete. "Are you sure—"

"Go ahead, Jack. Mel, Hank, go along and lend a hand." Pete turned back to Captain Varga. "Suppose we go inside to more comfortable quarters," he said. "We're always glad to have word from Earth."

"I'm sure," said Captain Varga in an acid voice. He stood up sharply. "Come along, Nathan."

They passed through a dark, smelly corridor into Pete's living room. For a colony house, it wasn't bad: good plastic chairs, a handmade rug on the floor, even one of

Mary Turner's paintings on the wall, and several of the weird, stylized carvings the Dusties had done for Pete. But the place smelled of tar and sweat, and Captain Varga's nose wrinkled in distaste. Nathan drew out a large silk handkerchief and wiped his pink hands, touching his nose daintily.

The Dustie hopped into the room ahead of them and settled into the biggest, most comfortable chair. Pete snapped his fingers sharply. The brown creature jumped down again like a naughty child chastised and settled back on Pete's knee.

The Captain glanced at the chair distastefully and sat down in another. "Do you actually let those horrid creatures have the run of your house?" he snapped.

"Why not?" Pete said. "We have the run of their planet. They're quite harmless, really. And quite clean."

The Captain sniffed. "Nasty things. Might find a use for the furs, though. They look quite soft."

"I'm afraid we don't kill Dusties," said Pete coolly. "They're friendly and they're not unintelligent." He looked at the Captain and Nathan, and decided not to break out the Scotch. "Now what's the trouble?"

"The only trouble will be the trouble you make," said the Captain. "You have your year's *taaro* ready for shipping?"

"Of course."

The Captain took out a small pencil on a chain and began to twirl it.

"How much is there, specifically?"
"Twenty thousand, Earth weight."
"Tons?"

Pete shook his head. "Hundred weight."

The Captain raised his eyebrows. "I see. And there are—" he consulted the papers in his hand— "roughly two hundred and twenty people in the colony, is that right?"

"That's right."

"Seventy-four men, eighty-one women, and fifty-nine children, to be exact?"

"I'd have to look it up. Margaret Singman had twins the other night—"

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped the Captain. "On a planet of the size of Baron IV, with seventy-four men, you should be yielding a dozen times the *taaro* weight you stated. We'll consider that your quota for a starter, at least. You have ample seed, according to my records. I should think, with the proper equipment—"

"Now wait a minute," Pete said softly. "We're fighting a climate here, Captain. You should know that. We have only a two-planting season, and the 'proper equipment,' as you call it, doesn't operate too well out here. It has a way of clogging up with dust in the summer, and rusting out in the winter."

"Really," said Captain Varga. "As I was saying, with the proper equipment, you could cultivate a great deal more land than you seem to be using. This would give you the necessary

heavier yield. Wouldn't you say so, Nathan?"

The little nervous man nodded. "Certainly, Captain. With the proper organization of labor."

"I wouldn't write it down anywhere," Pete said angrily. "You won't get that kind of yield from this planet. The ground won't give it, and the *mén* won't grow it."

The Captain gave him a long look. "Really," he said. "I think you're wrong. I think the men will grow it."

Pete stood up slowly. "What are you trying to say? This garbage about quotas and organization of labor—"

"You didn't read our credentials as we instructed you, Farnam. Mr. Nathan is the official Governor of the colony on Baron IV, as of now. You'll find him most cooperative, I'm sure, but he's answerable directly to me in all matters. My job is administration of the entire Baron system. Clear enough?"

Pete's eyes were dark. "I think you'd better draw me a picture," he said tightly. "A very clear picture."

"Very well. Baron IV is not paying for its upkeep. *Taaro*, after all, is not the most necessary of crops in the universe. It has value, but not very much value, all things considered. If the production of *taaro* here is not increased sharply, it may be necessary to close down the colony altogether."

"You're a liar," said Pete shortly. "The Colonization Board makes no

production demands on the colonies. Nor does it farm out systems for personal exploitation."

The Captain smiled. "The Colonization Board, as you call it, has undergone a slight reorganization."

"*Reorganization!* It's a top-level Board in the Earth Government! Nothing could reorganize it but a wholesale—" He broke off, his jaw sagging as the implication sank in. "You're rather out on a limb, you see," said the Captain coolly. "Poor communications and all that. But the Earth Government has undergone a slight reorganization, also."

The Dustie knew that something had happened.

Pete didn't know how he knew. The Dusties couldn't talk—couldn't make *any* noise, as far as Pete knew. But they always seemed to know when something unusual was happening. It was wrong, really, to consider them unintelligent animals. There are other sorts of intelligence than human, and other sorts of communication, and other sorts of culture. The Baron IV colonists had never understood the source of the queer perception that the Dusties seemed to possess, any more than they knew how many Dusties there were, or what they ate, or where on the planet they lived. All they knew was that when they had landed on Baron IV, the Dusties had been there.

At first the creatures had been

very timid. For weeks the men and women, busy with their building, had paid little attention to the skittering brown forms that crept down from the rocky hills to watch them with big, curious eyes. They were about half the size of men, and strangely humanoid in appearance, not in the sense that a monkey is humanoid—for they did not resemble monkeys—but in some way the colonists could not quite pin down. It was the way they walked around on their long, fragile hind legs; the way they stroked their pointed chins as they sat and watched and listened with their ears lifted alertly, watching with soft gray eyes; the way they handled objects with their little four-fingered hands.

They were so remarkably human-like in their elfin way that the colonists couldn't help but be drawn to the creatures. That whole first summer, when they were building the village and the landing groove for the ships, the Dusties were among them, trying pathetically to help, so eager for friendship that even occasional rebuffs failed to drive them away. They *liked* the colony: they seemed, somehow, to savor the atmosphere, moving about like solemn, fuzzy overseers as the work progressed through the summer.

Pete Farnam thought that they had even tried to warn the people about the winter. But the colonists couldn't understand, of course. Not until later. The Dusties became a

standing joke and were tolerated with considerable amusement—until the winter struck.

It had come with almost unbelievable ferocity. The houses had not been completed when the first hurricanes came, and the inadequate structures were torn apart like toothpicks. The winds came: vicious winds full of dust and sleet, wild erratic twisting gales that ripped the village to shreds, tearing off the topsoil that had been broken and fertilized—a merciless, never-ending wind that tore and screamed the planet's protest. It drove the sand and dirt and ice into the heart of the generators, and the heating units corroded and jammed and went dead. The jeeps and tractors and bulldozers were scored and rusted. The people began dying by the dozens as they huddled down in the pitiful little holes they had dug to try to keep the wind away . . .

Few of them were still conscious when the Dusties had come, silently in the blizzard, eyes closed tight against the blast, to drag the people up into the hills, into caves and hollows that still showed the fresh marks of carving tools. They had brought food—from where, nobody knew, for the colony's food had been destroyed by the first blast of the hurricane—but whatever it was had kept the colonists alive. And somehow, they had survived the winter which seemed never to end. There were frozen legs and ruined eyes;

there was pneumonia so swift and virulent that even the antibiotics they managed to salvage could not stop it; there was near-starvation. But they were kept alive until the winds began to die, and then they walked out of their holes in the ground to see the ruins of their first village.

The Dusties were not considered funny from that winter on. What had motivated them, no one knew, but the colony owed them their lives. The Dusties tried to help the people rebuild. They showed how to build windshields that would keep houses intact and anchored to the ground when the winds came again; they built little furnaces out of dirt and rock which defied the wind and gave great heat; they showed the colonists a dozen things which they needed to know for life on the little planet. And the colonists in turn tried to teach the Dusties something about Earth, and how the colonists had lived, and why they had come.

But there was a perceptible barrier that could not be crossed. The Dusties learned simple things, but slowly and imperfectly. They seemed content to take on their mock overseer's role, moving in and about the village, approving or disapproving, but always trying to help. Some became personal pets, though 'pet' was the wrong word, because the relationship was more of a strange personal friendship, limited by utter lack of communication. And the col-

onists made sure that the Dusties were granted the respect due them as rightful masters of Baron IV. And somehow the Dusties even perceived this attitude and were so grateful for the acceptance and friendship that there seemed nothing they wouldn't do for the colonists.

There had been many discussions about the Dusties. "You'd think they'd resent our moving in on them," Jack Mario had said one day. "After all, we are usurpers. And they treat us like kings. Have you noticed the way they mimic us? I saw one chewing tobacco the other day. He hated the stuff, but he chewed away, and spat like a trooper—"

One of the Dusties had been sitting on Pete's knee when Captain Varga had been talking, and he had known that something terrible was wrong. Now he sat on the desk in the office, moving uneasily back and forth as Pete looked up at Mario's dark face, and then across at John Tegan and Mel Dorfman. John's face was dark with anger, and he ran his fingers through the heavy gray beard that fell down to his chest. Mel sat stunned, shaking his head helplessly.

Mario was unable to restrain himself. His face was bitter as he stomped across the room, then returned to shake his fist under Pete's nose. "But did you see him?" he choked. "Governor of the colony! What does he know about growing

tadpo in this kind of soil? Did you see those hands? Soft, sticky, pink! How could a man with hands like that govern a colony?"

Pete looked over at John Tegan. "Well, John?"

The big man looked up, his eyes hollow under craggy brows. "It's below the belt, Pete. If the government's been overthrown, then the Captain is right. It leaves us out on a limb."

Pete shook his head. "I can't give him an answer," he said. "The answer has got to come from the colony. All I can do is speak for the colony."

Tegan stared at the floor. "We're an Earth colony," he said softly. "I know that. I was born in New York. I lived there for many years. But it isn't home. This is." He looked at Pete. "I built it. You built it. All of us built, even when things were getting stormy back home. Maybe that's why we came—maybe somehow we saw the handwriting on the wall."

"But when did it happen?" Mel burst out suddenly. "How could anything so big happen so fast?"

"Speed was the secret," Pete said gloomily. "It was quick, it was well organized—and the government was unstable. We're just caught in the edge of it. Pity the ones living there, now. But the new government views the colonies as areas of exploitation instead of development."

"Well, they can't do it," Mario

cried. "This is my land, my home. Nobody can tell me what to grow in my fields—"

Pete looked up at him. "Sit down, Mario. You're making me tired."

"But can you sit and take it?"

Pete's fist slammed down on the desk. "Well, what do you want me to do?" he roared. "The law of the land is sitting out there in that ship. Tomorrow morning he'll come back here to the village to install his pink-faced friend as Governor. There are guns and soldiers on that ship to back him up. What can I do about it? What can anybody do?"

"I wonder," said John Tegan, slowly.

"You name it and I'm with you."

John looked up at Mario. "What were you thinking of, Jack?"

"I don't like the new law," Mario snarled. "I say fight it."

"How?"

Jack Mario looked around the room eagerly. "There are only a dozen men on that ship," he said softly. "We've got seventy-four. When Varga comes back to the village tomorrow, we tell him to take his friend back to the ship and shove off. We give him five minutes to get turned around. If he doesn't, we start shooting."

"Just one little thing," said Pete quietly. "What about the supplies? What if you fought them off and won—what about the food, the clothing, the replacement parts for the machines?"

"We don't need machinery to farm this land," said Mario eagerly. "There's food here, food we can live on. The Dusties showed us that that first winter. And we can farm the land for our own use and let the machinery rust. There's nothing they can bring us from Earth that we can't do without."

"We couldn't get away with it!" Mel Dorfman sat forward, searching Mario's face. "You're saying cut ourselves off from Earth completely. They'd never let us. They'd send ships to bomb us out—"

"We could hide! We could build up after they had finished—"

Pete Farnam shook his head. "They'd never leave us alone, Jack. Didn't you see that Captain? That kind of mind can't stand opposition. We'd just be a thorn in their side. They don't want any free colonies."

"Well, let's give them one." Mario sat down tiredly, snapping his fingers at the Dustie. "Furs!" he snarled. He looked up, his dark eyes burning. "It's no good, Pete. We can't let them get away with it. Produce for them, try to raise the yield for them, all right. But not a Governor. If they insist, we can throw them out and make them stay out."

"I don't think so. The soldiers on that ship can butcher us. They'd wipe us out."

John Tegan sat up and looked Pete Farnam right in the eye. "In that case, I think it might be better if they did," he said.

Pete stared at him for a moment and slowly stood up. "All right," he said. "Call a general colony meeting. We'll see what the women think. Then we'll make our plans."

The ship's jeep screeched to a halt in a cloud of dust, and Captain Varga peered through the windshield. Then he stood up, staring at the three men blocking the road at the edge of the village. The little pink-faced man at his side turned white when he saws the faces of the men, and his fingers began to tremble. Each of the men had a gun.

"You'd better clear the road," the Captain snapped. "We're driving through."

Nathan's face turned viciously to Varga. "I told you," he snarled. "Too big for their boots. Go on. Go on through."

The Captain laughed and gunned the motor. He started straight for the men blocking the road. Then Jack Mario shot a hole in his front tire. The jeep lurched to a stop. Captain Varga stood up and glared at the men. "Farnam, step out here," he said.

"You heard us," Pete said, without moving. "Crops, yes. We'll try to increase our yield. An Overseer, no. Leave him here and we'll kill him."

"Once more," said the Captain, "clear the way. This man is your new Governor. He will be regarded as the official agent of the Earth Government until the final production

capacity of this colony is determined. Now clear out."

The men didn't move. Without another word, the Captain threw the jeep into reverse, jerked back into a curve, and started the jeep, flat tire and all, back toward the ship in a billow of dust.

Abruptly the village exploded into activity. Four men took up places behind the row of windbreaks beyond the first row of cabins. Pete turned and ran back into the village. He found John Tegan commandeering a squad of ten dirty-faced men. "Are the women and children all out?" he shouted.

"All taken care of." Tegan spat tobacco juice and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Where's Mel?"

"Left flank. He'll try to move in behind them. Gonna be tough, Pete—they've got good weapons."

"What about the boys last night?"

John was checking the bolt on his ancient rifle. "Hank and Ringo? Just got back an hour ago. If Varga wants to get his surface planes into action, he's going to have to dismantle them and rebuild them outside. The boys jammed the launching ports up slick as a whistle, and no mistakes." He spat again. "Don't worry, Pete. This is going to be a ground fight."

"Okay." Pete held out his hand to the old man. "This may be it. And if we turn them back, there's bound to be more later."

"There's a lot of planet to hide on," said Tegan. "They may come back, but then after a while they'll go again."

Pete nodded. "I just hope we'll still be here when they do—"

They waited. It seemed like hours. Pete moved from post to post among the men—heavy-faced men, men he had known all his life, it seemed. They waited with whatever weapons they had available: pistols, home-made revolvers, ortho-guns, an occasional rifle, even knives and clubs. Pete's heart sank. They were bitter men, but they were a mob; they had no organization, no training for fighting. They would be facing a dozen of Security's best-disciplined shock-troops, armed with the latest weapons from Earth's electronics laboratories. The colonists didn't stand a chance.

Pete got his rifle and made his way up the rise of ground overlooking the right flank of the village. Squinting, he could spot a cloud of dust rising up near the glistening ship, moving toward the village. And then, for the first time, he realized that he hadn't seen the Dusties all day.

It puzzled him. They had been in the village in abundance an hour before dawn, while the plans were being laid out. He glanced around, hoping to see one of the fuzzy brown forms at his elbow, but he saw nothing. And then, as he blinked at the

cloud of dust coming across the valley, he thought he saw the ground moving . . .

He blinked and rubbed his eyes. With a gasp he dragged out his binoculars and peered down at the valley floor. There were dozens of them, thousands, a hundred thousand, their brown bodies moving slowly out from the hills surrounding the village, converging into a broad, liquid column between the village and the ship. Even as he watched, the column grew thicker, like a heavy blanket being drawn across the road, a multitude of Dusties lining up.

Pete's hair prickled on the back of his neck. He knew so little about the creatures, so very little. As he watched the brown carpet rolling out, he tried to think. Could there be a weapon in their hands? Could they somehow have perceived the evil that came from the ship, somehow sensed the desperation in the men's voices as they had laid their plans? Pete stared, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. They were there in the road, thousands upon thousands of them, standing there . . .

Three columns of dust were coming from the road now. Through the glasses Pete could see the jeeps. They were filled with men in gleaming gray uniforms; crash helmets were tight about their heads and blasters glistened in the pale light. They moved in deadly convoy along the rutted road, coming closer and closer

to the line of the motionless Dusties.

The Dusties just stood still. They didn't move. They didn't shift or turn. They just waited.

The Captain's car was first in line. He pulled up before the line with a screech of brakes and stared at the sea of creatures before him. "Get out of there!" he shouted.

The Dusties didn't move.

The Captain turned to his men. "Fire into them," he snapped. "Clear a path."

There was a blaze of fire, and half a dozen Dusties slid to the ground, convulsing. Pete felt a chill pass through him as he stared in disbelief. The Dusties had a weapon, they must have a weapon, he kept telling himself—something he had never dreamed of.

And then the guns came up again, and another volley echoed across the valley, and a few more Dusties fell to the ground. And still the creatures held their ground.

With a curse the Captain sat down in the seat, gunned the motor and started forward. The jeep struck the fallen bodies, rolled over them, and plunged straight into the thick of the creatures—and still they didn't move. The car slowed, striking half a dozen, and stopped, mired down. The other cars picked up momentum and plunged into the brown river of creatures, and slogged down, and ground to a stop.

The Captain started roaring at his men. "Slice them down," he

screamed. The blasters started roaring into the faces of the Dusties, and they began falling. The jeeps moved a few feet, but still more of the creatures filled up the breach . . .

Pete heard a cry below him and saw Jack Mario standing in the road. Mario's gun was on the ground and his hands were out in front of him as he stared in horror as the Dusties kept moving into the fire.

"Do you see what they're doing!" he screamed. "They'll slaughter them, they'll slaughter every one—" And then he was running down the road, shouting at them to stop, and so was Pete, and Tegan, and the rest of the men—

Something hit Pete in the shoulder as he ran; he screamed out and fell into the dusty road. A group of Dusties closed around him, lifting him up bodily, starting back through the village with him. He tried to struggle, but vaguely he saw the other men being carried back, also, while the river of creatures still surrounded the jeeps. Frantically, the Dusties half carried, half dragged him, their legs twisting as they ran. They went through the village, and up the hills behind, up a long ravine. They set Pete on his feet then and supported him, and then he came willingly. He didn't know what they were doing. But he knew they were trying to save him, and he followed.

They reached a cave—a cave Pete knew for certain had not been here when he had led exploring parties

through these hills years before. It was a huge opening, and already a dozen of the men were there, waiting, eyes wide with horror at what they had witnessed down in the valley. And more men were stumbling up the rocky incline, tugged by the fuzzy brown creatures with their wide frantic eyes and their eager fingers. They walked into the cave and found steps moving down into the side of rock, deep into the dark coolness of the earth. Down and down they went, until they suddenly found themselves in a mammoth room. And then Pete stopped and stared at the men who were already there.

Jack Mario sat on the floor, his face in his hands. He was sobbing. Tegan was sitting, too, his face stony, as if he had never seen Pete before. Dorfman was trembling like a leaf. Pete stared about him through the dim light, and then followed Tegan's finger down to the end of the room.

He couldn't see it clearly, at first. There was a dais there, with four steps leading up to the round platform at the top. A light burned on top of the dais, and behind the light, rising high into the gloom, stood a statue.

It was a beautifully carved thing, hewn from the heavy granite that made up the core of this planet. The designing was intricate, the lines carefully turned and polished. At first Pete thought it was a statue of a Dustie, but then he moved forward and squinted at it in the dim

light. And then, in the space of a second, he knew why the Dusties had done this incredible thing.

The statue was weirdly beautiful, in a curious art form such as Pete had never seen. It was the work of a master sculptor. It was a figure, standing with five-fingered hands on hips, head raised high. It was not a portrait, but an image seen through other eyes than human. It stood high in the room with the light burning reverently at its feet.

It was the statue of a man.

They heard the bombs much later. The granite roof and floor trembled, and the men and women stared at each other, helpless and sick as they huddled in that great hall. But soon the bombs stopped, and after a while, the colonists stumbled out of that grotto into the dimming light again. The ship was gone.

It would be back. It might come back to search; it might send men to go through the rubble of the village they had just ruined, or they might wait, and bomb out the new village when it rose once more. But the village would rise again and again, if necessary. And any time the hunters came back, they would find no one. Some day, they would give up. And some day, finally, Pete knew that the colonists would find a life. It would be a hard fight, but he knew one thing, and that one thing was strange and wonderful:

No matter what they had to do, the Dusties would help them. * * *

ADJUSTMENT TEAM

by Philip K. Dick

**SOMETHING WENT WRONG . . . AND ED FLETCHER GOT
MIXED UP IN THE BIGGEST THING IN HIS LIFE.**



IT WAS BRIGHT MORNING. The sun shone down on the damp lawns and sidewalks, reflecting off the sparkling parked cars. The Clerk came walking hurriedly, leaf-

ing through his instructions, flipping pages and frowning. He stopped in front of the small green stucco house for a moment, and then turned up the walk, entering the back yard.

The dog was asleep inside his shed, his back turned to the world. Only his thick tail showed.

"For Heaven's sake," the Clerk exclaimed, hands on his hips. He tapped his mechanical pencil noisily against his clipboard. "Wake up, you in there."

The dog stirred. He came slowly out of his shed, head first, blinking and yawning in the morning sunlight. "Oh, it's you. Already?" He yawned again.

"Big doings." The Clerk ran his expert finger down the traffic-control sheet. "They're adjusting Sector T137 this morning. Starting at exactly nine o'clock." He glanced at his pocket watch. "Three hour alteration. Will finish by noon."

"T137? That's not far from here."

The Clerk's thin lips twisted with contempt. "Indeed. You're showing astonishing perspicacity, my black-haired friend. Maybe you can divine why I'm here."

"We overlap with T137."

"Exactly. Elements from this Sector are involved. We must make sure they're properly placed when the adjustment begins." The Clerk glanced toward the small green stucco house. "Your particular task concerns the man in there. He is employed by a business establishment lying within

Sector T137. It's essential that he be there before nine o'clock."

The dog studied the house. The shades had been let up. The kitchen light was on. Beyond the lace curtains dim shapes could be seen, stirring around the table. A man and woman. They were drinking coffee.

"There they are," the dog murmured. "The man, you say? He's not going to be harmed, is he?"

"Of course not. But he must be at his office early. Usually he doesn't leave until after nine. Today he must leave at eight-thirty. He must be within Sector T137 before the process begins, or he won't be altered to coincide with the new adjustment."

The dog sighed. "That means I have to summon."

"Correct." The Clerk checked his instruction sheet. "You're to summon at precisely eight-fifteen. You've got that? Eight-fifteen. No later."

"What will an eight-fifteen summons bring?"

The Clerk flipped open his instruction book, examining the code columns. "It will bring A Friend with a Car. To drive him to work early." He closed the book and folded his arms, preparing to wait. "That way he'll get to his office almost an hour ahead of time. Which is vital."

"Vital," the dog murmured. He lay down, half inside his shed. His eyes closed. "Vital."

"Wake up! This must be done

exactly on time. If you summon too soon or too late—"

The dog nodded sleepily. "I know. I'll do it right. I *always* do it right."

Ed Fletcher poured more cream in his coffee. He sighed, leaning back in his chair. Behind him the oven hissed softly, filling the kitchen with warm fumes. The yellow overhead light beamed down.

"Another roll?" Ruth asked.

"I'm full." Ed sipped his coffee. "You can have it."

"Have to go." Ruth got to her feet, unfastening her robe. "Time to go to work."

"Already?"

"Sure. You lucky bum! Wish I could sit around." Ruth moved toward the bathroom, running her fingers through her long black hair. "When you work for the Government you start early."

"But you get off early," Ed pointed out. He unfolded the *Cbronicle*, examining the sporting green. "Well, have a good time today. Don't type any wrong words, any double-entendres."

The bathroom door closed, as Ruth shed her robe and began dressing.

Ed yawned and glanced up at the clock over the sink. Plenty of time. Not even eight. He sipped more coffee and then rubbed his stubbled chin. He would have to shave. He shrugged lazily. Ten minutes, maybe.

Ruth came bustling out in her nylon slip, hurrying into the bedroom. "I'm late." She rushed rapidly around, getting into her blouse and skirt, her stockings, her little white shoes. Finally she bent over and kissed him. "Goodbye, honey. I'll do the shopping tonight."

"Goodbye." Ed lowered his newspaper and put his arm around his wife's trim waist, hugging her affectionately. "You smell nice. Don't flirt with the boss."

Ruth ran out the front door, clattering down the steps. He heard the click of her heels diminish down the sidewalk.

She was gone. The house was silent. He was alone.

Ed got to his feet, pushing his chair back. He wandered lazily into the bathroom and got his razor down. Eight-ten. He washed his face, rubbing it down with shaving cream, and began to shave. He shaved leisurely. He had plenty of time.

The Clerk bent over his round pocket watch, licking his lips nervously. Sweat stood out on his forehead. The second hand ticked on. Eight-fourteen. Almost time.

"Get ready!" the Clerk snapped. He tensed, his small body rigid. "Ten seconds to go!"

"Time!" the Clerk cried.

Nothing happened.

The Clerk turned, eyes wide with horror. From the little shed a thick

black tail showed. The dog had gone back to sleep.

"TIME!" the Clerk shrieked. He kicked wildly at the furry rump. "In the name of God—"

The dog stirred. He thumped around hastily, backing out of the shed. "My goodness." Embarrassed, he made his way quickly to the fence. Standing up on his hind paws, he opened his mouth wide. "Woof!" he summoned. He glanced apologetically at the Clerk. "I beg your pardon. I can't understand how—"

The Clerk gazed fixedly down at his watch. Cold terror knotted his stomach. The hands showed eight-sixteen. "You failed," he grated. "You failed! You miserable flea-bitten rag-bag of a wornout old mutt! You failed!"

The dog dropped and came anxiously back. "I failed, you say? You mean the summons time was—?"

"You summoned too late." The Clerk put his watch away slowly, a glazed expression on his face. "You summoned too late. We won't get A Friend with a Car. There's no telling what will come instead. I'm afraid to see what eight-sixteen brings."

"I hope he'll be in Sector T137 in time."

"He won't," the Clerk wailed. "He won't be there. We've made a mistake. We've made things go wrong!"

Ed was rinsing the shaving cream from his face when the muffled

sound of the dog's bark echoed through the silent house.

"Damn," Ed muttered. "Wake up the whole block." He dried his face, listening. Was somebody coming?

A vibration. Then—

The doorbell rang.

Ed came out of the bathroom. Who could it be? Had Ruth forgotten something? He tossed on a white shirt and opened the front door.

A bright young man, face bland and eager, beamed happily at him. "Good morning, sir." He tipped his hat. "I'm sorry to bother you so early—"

"What do you want?"

"I'm from the Federal Life Insurance Company. I'm here to see you about—"

Ed pushed the door closed. "Don't want any. I'm in a rush. Have to get to work."

"Your wife said this was the only time I could catch you." The young man picked up his briefcase, easing the door open again. "She especially asked me to come this early. We don't usually begin our work at this time, but since she asked me, I made a special note about it."

"Okay." Sighing wearily, Ed admitted the young man. "You can explain your policy while I get dressed."

The young man opened his briefcase on the couch, laying out heaps of pamphlets and illustrated folders. "I'd like to show you some of these figures, if I may. It's of great impor-

tance to you and your family to—"

Ed found himself sitting down, going over the pamphlets. He purchased a ten-thousand dollar policy on his own life and then eased the young man out. He looked at the clock. Practically nine-thirty!

"Damn." He'd be late to work. He finished fastening his tie, grabbed his coat, turned off the oven and the lights, dumped the dishes in the sink, and ran out on the porch.

As he hurried toward the bus stop he was cursing inwardly. Life insurance salesman. Why did the jerk have to come just as he was getting ready to leave?

Ed groaned. No telling what the consequences would be, getting to the office late. He wouldn't get there until almost ten. He set himself in anticipation. A sixth sense told him he was in for it. Something bad. It was the wrong day to be late.

If only the salesman hadn't come.

Ed hopped off the bus a block from his office. He began walking rapidly. The huge clock in front of Stein's Jewelry Store told him it was almost ten.

His heart sank. Old Douglas would give him hell for sure. He could see it now. Douglas puffing and blowing, red-faced, waving his thick finger at him; Miss Evans, smiling behind her typewriter; Jackie, the office boy, grinning and snickering; Earl Hendricks; Joe and Tom; Mary, dark-eyed, full bosom

and long lashes. All of them, kidding him the whole rest of the day.

He came to the corner and stopped for the light. On the other side of the street rose the big white concrete building, the towering column of steel and cement, girders and glass windows—the office building. Ed flinched. Maybe he could say the elevator got stuck. Somewhere between the second and third floor.

The street light changed. Nobody else was crossing. Ed crossed alone. He hopped up on the curb on the far side—

And stopped, rigid.

The sun had winked off. One moment it was beaming down. Then it was gone. Ed looked sharply up. Gray clouds swirled above him. Huge, formless clouds. Nothing more. An ominous, thick haze that made everything waver and dim. Uneasy chills plucked at him. *What was it?*

He advanced cautiously, feeling his way through the mist. Everything was silent. No sounds—not even the traffic sounds. Ed peered frantically around, trying to see through the rolling haze. No people. No cars. No sun. Nothing.

The office building loomed up ahead, ghostly. It was an indistinct gray. He put out his hand uncertainly—

A section of the building fell away. It rained down, a torrent of particles. Like sand. Ed gaped foolishly. A cascade of gray debris, spilling

around his feet. And where he had touched the building, a jagged cavity yawned—an ugly pit marring the concrete.

Dazed, he made his way to the front steps. He mounted them. The steps gave way underfoot. His feet sank down. He was wading through shifting sand, weak, rotted stuff that broke under his weight.

He got into the lobby. The lobby was dim and obscure. The overhead lights flickered feebly in the gloom. An unearthly pall hung over everything.

He spied the cigar stand. The seller leaned silently, resting on the counter, toothpick between his teeth, his face vacant. *And gray.* He was gray all over.

"Hey," Ed croaked. "What's going on?"

The seller did not answer. Ed reached out toward him. His hand touched the seller's gray arm—and passed right through.

"Good God," Ed said.

The seller's arm came loose. It fell to the lobby floor, disintegrating into fragments. Bits of gray fibre. Like dust. Ed's senses reeled.

"Help!" he shouted, finding his voice.

No answer. He peered around. A few shapes stood here and there: a man reading a newspaper, two women waiting at the elevator.

Ed made his way over to the man. He reached out and touched him.

The man slowly collapsed. He set-

tled into a heap, a loose pile of gray ash. Dust. Particles. The two women dissolved when he touched them. Silently. They made no sound as they broke apart.

Ed found the stairs. He grabbed hold of the bannister and climbed. The stairs collapsed under him. He hurried faster. Behind him lay a broken path—his footprints clearly visible in the concrete. Clouds of ash blew around him as he reached the second floor.

He gazed down the silent corridor. He saw more clouds of ash. He heard no sound. There was just darkness—rolling darkness.

He climbed unsteadily to the third floor. Once, his shoe broke completely through the stair. For a sickening second he hung, poised over a yawning hole that looked down into a bottomless nothing.

Then he climbed on, and emerged in front of his own office: DOUGLAS AND BLAKE, REAL ESTATE.

The hall was dim, gloomy with clouds of ash. The overhead lights flickered fitfully. He reached for the door handle. The handle came off in his hand. He dropped it and dug his fingernails into the door. The plate glass crashed past him, breaking into bits. He tore the door open and stepped over it, into the office.

Miss Evans sat at her typewriter, fingers resting quietly on the keys. She did not move. She was gray, her hair, her skin, her clothing. She was without color. Ed touched her. His

fingers went through her shoulder, into dry flakiness.

He drew back, sickened. Miss Evans did not stir.

He moved on. He pushed against a desk. The desk collapsed into rotting dust. Earl Hendricks stood by the water cooler, a cup in his hand. He was a gray statue, unmoving. Nothing stirred. No sound. No life. The whole office was gray dust—without life or motion.

Ed found himself out in the corridor again. He shook his head, dazed. What did it mean? Was he going out of his mind? Was he—?

A sound.

Ed turned, peering into the gray mist. A creature was coming, hurrying rapidly. A man—a man in a white robe. Behind him others came. Men in white, with equipment. They were lugging complex machinery.

"Hey—" Ed gasped weakly.

The men stopped. Their mouths opened. Their eyes popped.

"Look!"

"Something's gone wrong!"

"One still charged."

"Get the de-energizer."

"We can't proceed until—"

The men came toward Ed, moving around him. One lugged a long hose with some sort of nozzle. A portable cart came wheeling up. Instructions were rapidly shouted.

Ed broke out of his paralysis. Fear swept over him. Panic. Something hideous was happening. He had to get out. Warn people. Get away.

He turned and ran, back down the stairs. The stairs collapsed under him. He fell half a flight, rolling in heaps of dry ash. He got to his feet and hurried on, down to the ground floor.

The lobby was lost in the clouds of gray ash. He pushed blindly through, toward the door. Behind him, the white-clad men were coming, dragging their equipment and shouting to each other, hurrying quickly after him.

He reached the sidewalk. Behind him the office building wavered and sagged, sinking to one side, torrents of ash raining down in heaps. He raced toward the corner, the men just behind him. Gray clouds swirled around him. He groped his way across the street, hands outstretched. He gained the opposite curb—

The sun winked on. Warm yellow sunlight streamed down on him. Cars honked. Traffic lights changed. On all sides men and women in bright spring clothes hurried and pushed: shoppers, a blue-clad cop, salesmen with briefcases. Stores, windows, signs . . . noisy cars moving up and down the street . . .

And overhead was the bright sun and familiar blue sky.

Ed halted, gasping for breath. He turned and looked back the way he had come. Across the street was the office building—as it had always been. Firm and distinct. Concrete and glass and steel.

He stepped back a pace and col-

lided with a hurrying citizen. "Hey," the man grunted. "Watch it."

"Sorry." Ed shook his head, trying to clear it. From where he stood, the office building looked like always, big and solemn and substantial, rising up imposingly on the other side of the street.

But a minute ago—

Maybe he was out of his mind. He had seen the building crumbling into dust. Building—and people. They had fallen into gray clouds of dust. And the men in white—they had chased him. Men in white robes, shouting orders, wheeling complex equipment.

He was out of his mind. There was no other explanation. Weakly, Ed turned and stumbled along the sidewalk, his mind reeling. He moved blindly, without purpose, lost in a haze of confusion and terror.

The Clerk was brought into the top-level Administrative chambers and told to wait.

He paced back and forth nervously, clasp and wringing his hands in an agony of apprehension. He took off his glasses and wiped them shakily.

Lord. All the trouble and grief. And it wasn't his fault. But he would have to take the rap. It was his responsibility to get the Summoners routed out and their instructions followed. The miserable flea-infested Summoner had gone back to sleep—and *he* would have to answer for it.

The doors opened. "All right," a voice murmured, preoccupied. It was a tired, care-worn voice. The Clerk trembled and entered slowly, sweat dripping down his neck into his celluloid collar.

The Old Man glanced up, laying aside his book. He studied the Clerk calmly, his faded blue eyes mild—a deep, ancient mildness that made the Clerk tremble even more. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"I understand there was a mistake," the Old Man murmured. "In connection with Sector T137. Something to do with an element from an adjoining area."

"That's right." The Clerk's voice was faint and husky. "Very unfortunate."

"What exactly occurred?"

"I started out this morning with my instruction sheets. The material relating to T137 had top priority, of course. I served notice on the Summoner in my area that an eight-fifteen summons was required."

"Did the Summoner understand the urgency?"

"Yes, sir." The Clerk hesitated. "But—"

"But what?"

The Clerk twisted miserably. "While my back was turned the Summoner crawled back in his shed and went to sleep. I was occupied, checking the exact time with my watch. I called the moment—but there was no response."

"You called at eight-fifteen exactly?"

"Yes, sir! Exactly eight-fifteen. But the Summoner was asleep. By the time I managed to arouse him it was eight-sixteen. He summoned, but instead of A Friend with a Car we got a—A Life Insurance Salesman." The Clerk's face screwed up with disgust. "The Salesman kept the element there until almost nine-thirty. Therefore he was late to work instead of early."

For a moment the Old Man was silent. "Then the element was not within T137 when the adjustment began."

"No. He arrived about ten o'clock."

"During the middle of the adjust-

ment." The Old Man got to his feet and paced slowly back and forth, face grim, hands behind his back. His long robe flowed out behind him. "A serious matter. During a Sector Adjustment all related elements from other Sectors must be included. Otherwise, their orientations remain out of phase. When this element entered T137 the adjustment had been in progress fifty minutes. The element encountered the Sector at its most de-energized stage. He wandered about until one of the adjustment teams met him."

"Did they catch him?"

"Unfortunately no. He fled, out of the Sector. Into a nearby fully energized area."

"What—what then?"



The Old Man stopped pacing, his lined face grim. He ran a heavy hand through his long white hair. "We do not know. We lost contact with him. We will re-establish contact soon, of course. But for the moment he is out of control."

"What are you going to do?"

"He must be contacted and contained. He must be brought up here. There's no other solution."

"Up *here!*"

"It is too late to de-energize him. By the time he is regained he will have told others. To wipe his mind clean would only complicate matters. Usual methods will not suffice. I must deal with this problem myself."

"I hope he's located quickly," the Clerk said.

"He will be. Every Watcher is alerted. Every Watcher and every Summoner." The Old Man's eyes twinkled. "Even the Clerks, although we hesitate to count on them."

The Clerk flushed. "I'll be glad when this thing is over," he muttered.

Ruth came tripping down the stairs and out of the building, into the hot noonday sun. She lit a cigarette and hurried along the walk, her small bosom rising and falling as she breathed in the spring air.

"Ruth." Ed stepped up behind her.

"Ed!" She spun, gasping in astonishment. "What are you doing away from—?"

"Come on." Ed grabbed her arm,

pulling her along. "Let's keep moving."

"But what—?"

"I'll tell you later." Ed's face was pale and grim. "Let's go where we can talk. In private."

"I was going down to have lunch at Louie's. We can talk there." Ruth hurried along breathlessly. "What is it? What's happened? You look so strange. And why aren't you at work? Did you—did you get fired?"

They crossed the street and entered a small restaurant. Men and women milled around, getting their lunch. Ed found a table in the back, secluded in a corner. "Here." He sat down abruptly. "This will do." She slid into the other chair.

Ed ordered a cup of coffee. Ruth had salad and creamed tuna on toast, coffee and peach pie. Silently, Ed watched her as she ate, his face dark and moody.

"Please tell me," Ruth begged.

"You really want to know?"

"Of course I want to know!" Ruth put her small hand anxiously on his. "I'm your wife."

"Something happened today. This morning. I was late to work. A damn insurance man came by and held me up. I was half an hour late."

Ruth caught her breath. "Douglas fired you."

"No." Ed ripped a paper napkin slowly into bits. He stuffed the bits in the half-empty water glass. "I was worried as hell. I got off the bus and hurried down the street. I noticed it

when I stepped up on the curb in front of the office."

"Noticed what?"

Ed told her. The whole works. Everything.

When he had finished, Ruth sat back, her face white, hands trembling. "I see," she murmured. "No wonder you're upset." She drank a little cold coffee, the cup rattling against the saucer. "What a tefrible thing."

Ed leaned intently toward his wife. "Ruth. Do you think I'm going crazy?"

Ruth's red lips twisted. "I don't know what to say. It's so strange . . ."

"Yeah. Strange is hardly the word for it. I poked my hands right through them. Like they were clay. Old dry clay. Dust. Dust figures." Ed lit a cigarette from Ruth's pack. "When I got out I looked back and there it was. The office building. Like always."

"You were afraid Mr. Douglas would bawl you out, weren't you?"

"Sure. I was afraid—and guilty." Ed's eyes flickered. "I know what you're thinking. I was late and I couldn't face him. So I had some sort of protective psychotic fit. Retreat from reality." He stubbed the cigarette out savagely. "Ruth, I've been wandering around town since. Two and a half hours. Sure, I'm afraid. I'm afraid like hell to go back."

"Of Douglas?"

"No! The men in white." Ed shuddered. "God. Chasing me. With their

damn hoses and—and equipment."

Ruth was silent. Finally she looked up at her husband, her dark eyes bright. "You have to go back, Ed."

"Back? Why?"

"To prove something."

"Prove what?"

"Prove it's all right." Ruth's hand pressed against his. "You have to, Ed. You have to go back and face it. To show yourself there's nothing to be afraid of."

"The hell with it! After what I saw? Listen, Ruth. I saw the fabric of reality split open. I saw—*behind*. Underneath. I saw what was really there. And I don't want to go back. I don't want to see dust people again. Ever."

Ruth's eyes were fixed intently on him. "I'll go back with you," she said.

"For God's sake."

"For *your* sake. For your sanity. So you'll know." Ruth got abruptly to her feet, pulling her coat around her. "Come on, Ed. I'll go with you. We'll go up there together. To the office of Douglas and Blake, Real Estate. I'll even go in with you to see Mr. Douglas."

Ed got up slowly, staring hard at his wife. "You think I blacked out. Cold feet. Couldn't face the boss." His voice was low and strained. "Don't you?"

Ruth was already threading her way toward the cashier. "Come on. You'll see. It'll all be there. Just like it always was."

"Okay," Ed said. He followed her

slowly. "We'll go back there—and see which of us is right."

They crossed the street together, Ruth holding on tight to Ed's arm. Ahead of them was the building, the towering structure of concrete and metal and glass.

"There it is," Ruth said. "See?"

There it was, all right. The big building rose up, firm and solid, glittering in the early afternoon sun, its windows sparkling brightly.

Ed and Ruth stepped up onto the curb. Ed tensed himself, his body rigid. He winced as his foot touched the pavement—

But nothing happened: the street noises continued; cars, people hurrying past; a kid selling papers. There were sounds, smells, the noises of the city in the middle of the day. And overhead was the sun and the bright blue sky.

"See?" Ruth said. "I was right."

They walked up the front steps, into the lobby. Behind the cigar stand the seller stood, arms folded, listening to the ball game. "Hi, Mr. Fletcher," he called to Ed. His face lit up good-naturedly. "Who's the dame? Your wife know about this?"

Ed laughed unsteadily. They passed on toward the elevator. Four or five businessmen stood waiting. They were middle-aged men, well dressed, waiting impatiently in a bunch. "Hey, Fletcher," one said. "Where you been all day? Douglas is yelling his head off."

"Hello, Earl," Ed muttered. He gripped Ruth's arm. "Been a little sick."

The elevator came. They got in. The elevator rose. "Hi, Ed," the elevator operator said. "Who's the good-looking gal? Why don't you introduce her around?"

Ed grinned mechanically. "My wife."

The elevator let them off at the third floor. Ed and Ruth got out, heading toward the glass door of Douglas and Blake, Real Estate.

Ed halted, breathing shallowly. "Wait." He licked his lips. "I—"

Ruth waited calmly as Ed wiped his forehead and neck with his handkerchief. "All right now?"

"Yeah." Ed moved forward. He pulled open the glass door.

Miss Evans glanced up, ceasing her typing. "Ed Fletcher! Where on earth have you been?"

"I've been sick. Hello, Tom."

Tom glanced up from his work. "Hi, Ed. Say, Douglas is yelling for your scalp. Where have you been?"

"I know." Ed turned wearily to Ruth. "I guess I better go in and face the music."

Ruth squeezed his arm. "You'll be all right. I know." She smiled, a relieved flash of white teeth and red lips. "Okay? Call me if you need me."

"Sure." Ed kissed her briefly on the mouth. "Thanks, honey. Thanks a lot. I don't know what the hell went wrong with me. I guess it's over."

"Forget it. So long." Ruth skipped

back out of the office, the door closing after her. Ed listened to her race down the hall to the elevator.

"Nice little gal," Jackie said appreciatively.

"Yeah." Ed nodded, straightening his necktie. He moved unhappily toward the inner office, steeling himself. Well, he had to face it. Ruth was right. But he was going to have a hell of a time explaining it to the boss. He could see Douglas now, thick red wattles, big bull roar, face distorted with rage—

Ed stopped abruptly at the entrance to the inner office. He froze rigid. The inner office—it was *changed*.

The hackles of his neck rose. Cold fear gripped him, clutching at his windpipe. The inner office was different. He turned his head slowly, taking in the sight: the desks, chairs, fixtures, file cabinets, pictures.

Changes. Little changes. Subtle. Ed closed his eyes and opened them slowly. He was alert, breathing rapidly, his pulse racing. It was changed, all right. No doubt about it.

"What's the matter, Ed?" Tom asked. The staff watched him curiously, pausing in their work.

Ed said nothing. He advanced slowly into the inner office. The office had been *gone over*. He could tell. Things had been altered. Rearranged. Nothing obvious—nothing he could put his finger on. But he could tell.

Joe Kent greeted him uneasily. "What's the matter, Ed? You look like a wild dog. Is something—?"

Ed studied Joe. He was different. Not the same. What was it?

Joe's face. It was a little fuller. His shirt was blue-striped. Joe never wore blue stripes. Ed examined Joe's desk. He saw papers and accounts. The desk—it was too far to the right. And it was bigger. It wasn't the same desk.

The picture on the wall. It wasn't the same. It was a different picture entirely. And the things on top of the file cabinet—some were new, others were gone.

He looked back through the door. Now that he thought about it, Miss Evans' hair was different, done a different way. And it was lighter.

In here, Mary, filing her nails, over by the window—she was taller, fuller. Her purse, lying on the desk in front of her—a red purse, red knit.

"You always . . . have that purse?" Ed demanded.

Mary glanced up. "What?"

"That purse. You always have that?"

Mary laughed. She smoothed her skirt coyly around her shapely thighs, her long lashes blinking modestly. "Why, Mr. Fletcher. What do you mean?"

Ed turned away. *He knew*. Even if she didn't. She had been redone—changed: her purse, her clothes, her figure, everything about her. None of them knew—but him. His mind

spun dizzily. They were all changed. All of them were different. They had all been remolded, recast. Subtly—but it was there.

The wastebasket. It was smaller, not the same. The window shades—white, not ivory. The wall paper was not the same pattern. The lighting fixtures . . .

Endless, subtle changes.

Ed made his way back to the inner office. He lifted his hand and knocked on Douglas' door.

"Come in."

Ed pushed the door open. Nathan Douglas looked up impatiently. "Mr. Douglas—" Ed began. He came into the room unsteadily—and stopped.

Douglas was not the same. Not at all. His whole office was changed: the rugs, the drapes. The desk was oak, not mahogany. And Douglas himself . . .

Douglas was younger, thinner. His hair, brown. His skin not so red. His face smoother. No wrinkles. Chin reshaped. Eyes green, not black. He was a different man. But still Douglas—a different Douglas. A different version!

"What is it?" Douglas demanded impatiently. "Oh, it's you, Fletcher. Where were you this morning?"

Ed backed out. Fast.

He slammed the door and hurried back through the inner office. Tom and Miss Evans glanced up, startled. Ed passed by them, grabbing the hall door open.

"Hey!" Tom called. "What—?"

Ed hurried down the hall. Terror leaped through him. He had to hurry. He had *seen*. There wasn't much time. He came to the elevator and stabbed the button.

No time.

He ran to the stairs and started down. He reached the second floor. His terror grew. It was a matter of seconds.

Seconds!

The public phone. Ed ran into the phone booth. He dragged the door shut after him. Wildly, he dropped a dime in the slot and dialed. He had to call the police. He held the receiver to his ear, his heart pounding.

Warn them. Changes. Somebody tampering with reality. Altering it. He had been right. The white-clad men . . . their equipment . . . going through the building.

"Hello!" Ed shouted hoarsely. There was no answer. No hum. Nothing.

Ed peered frantically out the door.

And he sagged, defeated. Slowly, he hung up the telephone receiver.

He was no longer on the second floor. The phone booth was rising, leaving the second floor behind, carrying him up, faster and faster. It rose floor by floor, moving silently, swiftly.

The phone booth passed through the ceiling of the building and out into the bright sunlight. It gained speed. The ground fell away below. Buildings and streets were getting smaller each moment. Tiny specks

hurried along, far below, cars and people, dwindling rapidly.

Clouds drifted between him and the earth. Ed shut his eyes, dizzy with fright. He held on desperately to the door handles of the phone booth.

Faster and faster the phone booth climbed. The earth was rapidly being left behind, far below.

Ed peered up wildly. *Where?* Where was he going? Where was it taking him?

He stood gripping the door handles, waiting.

The Clerk nodded curtly. "That's him, all right. The element in question."

Ed Fletcher looked around him. He was in a huge chamber. The edges fell away into indistinct shadows. In front of him stood a man with notes and ledgers under his arm, peering at him through steel-rimmed glasses. He was a nervous little man, sharp-eyed, with celluloid collar, blue-serge suit, vest, watch chain. He wore black, shiny shoes.

And beyond him—

An old man sat quietly, in an immense modern chair. He watched Fletcher calmly, his blue eyes mild and tired. A strange thrill shot through Fletcher. It was not fear. Rather it was a vibration, rattling his bones—a deep sense of awe, tinged with fascination.

"Where—what is this place?" he asked faintly. He was still dazed from his quick ascent.

"Don't ask questions!" the nervous little man snapped angrily, tapping his pencil against his ledgers. "You're here to answer, not ask."

The Old Man moved a little. He raised his hand. "I will speak to the element alone," he murmured. His voice was low. It vibrated and rumbled through the chamber. Again the wave of fascinated awe swept Ed.

"Alone?" The little fellow backed away, gathering his books and papers in his arms. "Of course." He glanced hostilely at Ed Fletcher. "I'm glad he's finally in custody. All the work and trouble just for—"

He disappeared through a door. The door closed softly behind him. Ed and the Old Man were alone.

"Please sit down," the Old Man said.

Ed found a seat. He sat down awkwardly, nervously. He got out his cigarettes and then put them away again.

"What's wrong?" the Old Man asked.

"I'm just beginning to understand."

"Understand what?"

"That I'm dead."

The Old Man smiled briefly. "Dead? No, you're not dead. You're . . . visiting. An unusual event, but necessitated by circumstances." He leaned toward Ed. "Mr. Fletcher, you have got yourself involved in something."

"Yeah," Ed agreed. "I wish I knew what it was. Or how it happened."

"It was not your fault. You're the victim of a clerical error. A mistake was made—not by you. But involving you."

"What mistake?" Ed rubbed his forehead wearily. "I—I got in on something. I saw *through*. I saw something I wasn't supposed to see."

The Old Man nodded. "That's right. You saw something you were not supposed to see—something few elements have even been aware of, let alone witnessed."

"Elements?"

"An official term. Let it pass. A mistake was made, but we hope to rectify it. It is my hope that—"

"Those people," Ed interrupted. "Heaps of dry ash. And gray. Like they were dead. Only it was everything: the stairs and walls and floor. No color or life."

"That Sector had been temporarily de-energized. So the adjustment team could enter and effect changes."

"Changes." Ed nodded. "That's right. When I went back later, everything was alive again. But not the same. It was all different."

"The adjustment was complete by noon. The team finished its work and re-energized the Sector."

"I see," Ed muttered.

"You were supposed to have been in the Sector when the adjustment began. Because of an error you were not. You came into the Sector late—during the adjustment itself. You fled, and when you returned it was over. You saw, and you should not

have seen. Instead of a witness you should have been part of the adjustment. Like the others, you should have undergone changes."

Sweat came out on Ed Fletcher's head. He wiped it away. His stomach turned over. Weakly, he cleared his throat. "I get the picture." His voice was almost inaudible. A chilling premonition moved through him. "I was supposed to be changed like the others. But I guess something went wrong."

"Something went wrong. An error occurred. And now a serious problem exists. You have seen these things. You know a great deal. And you are not coordinated with the new configuration."

"Gosh," Ed muttered. "Well, I won't tell anybody." Cold sweat poured off him. "You can count on that. I'm as good as changed."

"You have already told someone," the Old Man said coldly.

"Me?" Ed blinked. "Who?"

"Your wife."

Ed trembled. The color drained from his face, leaving it sickly white. "That's right. I did."

"Your wife knows." The Old Man's face twisted angrily. "A woman. Of all the things to tell—"

"I didn't know." Ed retreated, panic leaping through him. "But I know *now*. You can count on me. Consider me changed."

The ancient blue eyes bored keenly into him, peering far into his depths. "And you were going to call

the police. You wanted to inform the authorities."

"But I didn't know *who* was doing the changing."

"Now you know. The natural process must be supplemented—adjusted here and there. Corrections must be made. We are fully licensed to make such corrections. Our adjustment teams perform vital work."

Ed plucked up a measure of courage. "This particular adjustment. Douglas. The office. What was it for? I'm sure it was some worthwhile purpose."

The Old Man waved his hand. Behind him in the shadows an immense map glowed into existence. Ed caught his breath. The edges of the map faded off in obscurity. He saw an infinite web of detailed sections, a network of squares and ruled lines. Each square was marked. Some glowed with a blue light. The lights altered constantly.

"The Sector Board," the Old Man said. He sighed wearily. "A staggering job. Sometimes we wonder how we can go on another period. But it must be done. For the good of all. For *your* good."

"The change. In our—our Sector."

"Your office deals in real estate. The old Douglas was a shrewd man, but rapidly becoming infirm. His physical health was waning. In a few days Douglas will be offered a chance to purchase a large unimproved forest area in western Canada. It will require most of his assets. The older,

less virile Douglas would have hesitated. It is imperative he not hesitate. He must purchase the area and clear the land at once. Only a younger man—a younger Douglas—would undertake this.

"When the land is cleared, certain anthropological remains will be discovered. They have already been placed there. Douglas will lease his land to the Canadian Government for scientific study. The remains found there will cause international excitement in learned circles.

"A chain of events will be set in motion. Men from numerous countries will come to Canada to examine the remains. Soviet, Polish, and Czech scientists will make the journey.

"The chain of events will draw these scientists together for the first time in years. National research will be temporarily forgotten in the excitement of these non-national discoveries. One of the leading Soviet scientists will make friends with a Belgian scientist. Before they depart they will agree to correspond—without the knowledge of their governments, of course.

"The circle will widen. Other scientists on both sides will be drawn in. A society will be founded. More and more educated men will transfer an increasing amount of time to this international society. Purely national research will suffer a slight but extremely critical eclipse. The war tension will somewhat wane.

"This alteration is vital. And it is dependent on the purchase and clearing of the section of wilderness in Canada. The old Douglas would not have dared take the risk. But the altered Douglas, and his altered, more youthful staff, will pursue this work with wholehearted enthusiasm. And from this, the vital chain of widening events will come about. The beneficiaries will be *you*. Our methods may seem strange and indirect. Even incomprehensible. But I assure you we know what we're doing."

"I know that now," Ed said.

"So you do. You know a great deal. Much too much. No element should possess such knowledge. I should perhaps call an adjustment team in here . . ."

A picture formed in Ed's mind: swirling gray clouds, gray men and women. He shuddered. "Look," he croaked. "I'll do anything. Anything at all. Only don't de-energize me." Sweat ran down his face. "Okay?"

The Old Man pondered. "Perhaps some alternative could be found. There is another possibility . . ."

"What?" Ed asked eagerly. "What is it?"

The Old Man spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "If I allow you to return, you will swear never to speak of the matter? Will you swear not to reveal to anyone the things you saw? The things you know?"

"Sure!" Ed gasped eagerly, blinding relief flooding over him. "I swear!"

"Your wife. She must know nothing more. She must think it was only a passing psychological fit—retreat from reality."

"She thinks that already."

"She must continue to."

Ed set his jaw firmly. "I'll see that she continues to think it was a mental aberration. She'll never know what really happened."

"You are certain you can keep the truth from her?"

"Sure," Ed said confidently. "I know I can."

"All right." The Old Man nodded slowly. "I will send you back. But you must tell no one." He swelled visibly. "Remember: you will eventually come back to me—everyone does, in the end—and your fate will not be enviable."

"I won't tell her," Ed said, sweating. "I promise. You have my word on that. I can handle Ruth. Don't give it a second thought."

Ed arrived home at sunset.

He blinked, dazed from the rapid descent. For a moment he stood on the pavement, regaining his balance and catching his breath. Then he walked quickly up the path.

He pushed the door open and entered the little green stucco house.

"Ed!" Ruth came flying, face distorted with tears. She threw her arms around him, hugging him tight. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Been?" Ed murmured. "At the office, of course."

Ruth pulled back abruptly. "No, you haven't."

Vague tendrils of alarm plucked at Ed. "Of course I have. Where else—?"

"I called Douglas about three. He said you left. You walked out, practically as soon as I turned my back. Eddie—"

Ed patted her nervously. "Take it easy, honey." He began unbuttoning his coat. "Everything's okay. Understand? Things are perfectly all right."

Ruth sat down on the arm of the couch. She blew her nose, dabbing at her eyes. "If you knew how much I've worried." She put her handkerchief away and folded her arms. "I want to know where you were."

Uneasily, Ed hung his coat in the closet. He came over and kissed her. Her lips were ice cold. "I'll tell you all about it. But what do you say we have something to eat? I'm starved."

Ruth studied him intently. She got down from the arm of the couch. "I'll change and fix dinner."

She hurried into the bedroom and slipped off her shoes and nylons. Ed followed her. "I didn't mean to worry you," he said carefully. "After you left me today I realized you were right."

"Oh?" Ruth unfastened her blouse and skirt, arranging them over a hanger. "Right about what?"

"About me." He manufactured a grin and made it glow across his face. "About . . . what happened."

Ruth hung her slip over the hang-

er. She studied her husband intently as she struggled into her tight-fitting jeans. "Go on."

The moment had come. It was now or never. Ed Fletcher braced himself and chose his words carefully. "I realized," he stated, "that the whole darn thing was in my mind. You were right, Ruth. Completely right. And I even realize what caused it."

Ruth rolled her cotton T-shirt down and tucked it in her jeans. "What was the cause?"

"Overwork."

"Overwork?"

"I need a vacation. I haven't had a vacation in years. My mind isn't on my job. I've been daydreaming." He said it firmly, but his heart was in his mouth. "I need to get away. To the mountains. Bass fishing. Or—" He searched his mind frantically. "Or—"

Ruth came toward him ominously. "Ed!" she said sharply. "Look at me!"

"What's the matter?" Panic shot through him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Where were you this afternoon?"

Ed's grin faded. "I told you. I went for a walk. Didn't I tell you? A walk. To think things over."

"Don't lie to me, Eddie Fletcher! I can tell when you're lying!" Fresh tears welled up in Ruth's eyes. Her breasts rose and fell excitedly under her cotton shirt. "Admit it! You didn't go for a walk!"

Ed stammered weakly. Sweat

poured off him. He sagged helplessly against the door. "What do you mean?"

Ruth's black eyes flashed with anger. "Come on! I want to know where you were! Tell me! I have a right to know. What really happened?"

Ed retreated in terror, his resolve melting like wax. It was going all wrong. "Honest. I went out for a—"

"Tell me!" Ruth's sharp fingernails dug into his arm. "I want to know where you were—and who you were with!"

Ed opened his mouth. He tried to grin, but his face failed to respond. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know what I mean. Who were you with? Where did you go? Tell me! I'll find out, sooner or later."

There was no way out. He was licked—and he knew it. He couldn't keep it from her. Desperately he stalled, praying for time. If he could only distract her, get her mind on something else. If she would only let up, even for a second. He could invent something—a better story. Time—he needed more time. "Ruth, you've got to—"

Suddenly there was a sound: the bark of a dog, echoing through the dark house.

Ruth let go, cocking her head alertly. "That was Dobbie. I think somebody's coming."

The doorbell rang.

"You stay here. I'll be right back." Ruth ran out of the room, to the

front door. "Darn it." She pulled the front door open.

"Good evening!" The young man stepped quickly inside, loaded down with objects, grinning broadly at Ruth. "I'm from the Sweep-Rite Vacuum Cleaner Company."

Ruth scowled impatiently. "Really, we're about to sit down at the table."

"Oh, this will only take a moment." The young man set down the vacuum cleaner and its attachments with a metallic crash. Rapidly, he unrolled a long illustrated banner, showing the vacuum cleaner in action. "Now, if you'll just hold this while I plug in the cleaner—"

He hustled happily about, unplugging the TV set, plugging in the cleaner, pushing the chairs out of his way.

"I'll show you the drape scraper first." He attached a hose and nozzle to the big gleaming tank. "Now, if you'll just sit down I'll demonstrate each of these easy-to-use attachments." His happy voice rose over the roar of the cleaner. "You'll notice—"

Ed Fletcher sat down on the bed. He groped in his pocket until he found his cigarettes. Shakily he lit one and leaned back against the wall, weak with relief.

He gazed up, a look of gratitude on his face. "Thanks," he said softly. "I think we'll make it—after all. Thanks a lot." • • •

Intruder on the Rim

by Milton Lesser

**IT'S HARD TO FERRET OUT SECRETS ON THE
RIM OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM . . . BUT IT CAN BE DONE.**

STYX, like Earth's own Luna, always turns one side toward Pluto. Because of this, half of each



month on the ninth planet's only satellite sees the thermometer dip as close to absolute zero as it does in deep space itself. Even the thermometer on Styx is a tricky affair, measuring as it does absolute molecular activity in an environment where molecular activity is almost imperceptible.

"Stop it," said Trudy Adams, spinning around to frown prettily at her husband, while her long chestnut hair behaved like a miniature billowing cloak. "Tell me one more thing wrong with Styx—just one, and that's a promise—we'll turn around and rocket back to Earth."

Craig puffed his pipe with a completely exasperating confidence. "Not if I know my wife, we won't. The chance to cover Operation Zero for every teleo in Interplanetary Telliance won't be missed by Mrs. Trudy Adams, especially since this is the first time civilians ever got close enough to look, let alone teleo the whole operation all over the Solar System."

The beginnings of a smile threatened to unseat Trudy's frown. "Still as cocksure as the day you—well, never mind. What gets me is the sudden relaxation of security restrictions. Anybody know why?"

"That's the intriguing thing about it. One year no one's permitted beyond Neptune's orbit—though what they planned on doing some time in the future when Pluto's lop-sided ostrich-egg of an orbit swung her in

closer than Neptune, I don't know—anyway, the next year they gave the whole mysterious operation more publicity than the Interplanetary Olympics. As a result, we got the Telliance option to do this thing up brown."

"Styx still doesn't sound like a honeymooner's paradise . . ."

"So we're not honeymooners."

"But you said we'd always—"

"I was drunk or lying," Craig told her. "But don't feel sorry for yourself, honey. Feel sorry for Telliance. If Operation Zero turns out to be a big brass bust, Telliance will have laid the biggest egg in Interplanetary Telio history. They spent ten million dollars on publicity alone."

"Maybe Telliance has some inside info telling them Zero's as big as it's cracked up to be."

Craig shook his head, forming the thumb and forefinger of his right hand into a large nothing. "That's exactly what Telliance knows, at least according to Avery. They're taking a chance that all this security the past twenty years adds up to something big."

"Oh yeah? Then why forget about the security all of a sudden?"

"That, my pet, I don't know. That's why we're here. I can guess, though. With elections coming up, maybe someone's lobbying himself a return trip to Capitol Crater by cracking the security barrier. Anyway, security's been lifted, so maybe we'll find out why."

"Well—" But Trudy stopped in mid-sentence when a blinker flashed red-green, red-green on the panel to her left. "Now why do you suppose anyone should be radioing us?" Flicking a toggle, she faced the panel and spoke: "Adams, Spaceship *Or Bust*. Identify yourself."

The voice came in crystal clear, resonant, quite military. "Better identify *yourself*, young lady. You are in security space."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Trudy. "This isn't security space any longer. We're Adams and Adams of Interplanetary Telio Alliance, here to cover Operation Zero."

"Now who's ridiculous?" Incredulity had removed some of the crisp formality from the voice. "This has always been security space, still is security space and as far as I know always will be security space. If coming out here was some kind of gag, I'm afraid you are in serious trouble."

"See here—" Trudy began indignantly, but Craig prodded her away from the panel receiver and sat down in her place.

"Craig Adams," he said. "Who are you?"

"Colonel Tansley, Assistant Security Officer, Operation Zero. Was the woman serious about Interplanetary Telio Alliance? They asked for partial relaxation of security, were turned down."

Trudy was furious. "That isn't what they told us. If you think we came barrelling out here three and

a half billion miles to be sent home, Colonel, you've got another guess coming."

"Shut up!" Craig hissed in a stage whisper. "This guy's a big fish. We'll be free-lancing on the Martian Syrtis if we get Telliance into any trouble."

"But they said—"

"Shh! Uh, Colonel, we have clearance from Tycho Station as well as our credentials from Telliance, of course. Shall we land and present them?"

"Yes," the Colonel agreed. "Since you're here, ride the radar into Styx. But I'll tell you in advance: if you have clearance of any kind, it's counterfeit."

And the radio light blinked off.

"When I get my hands on that stuffed shirt . . ." Trudy wailed.

But Craig was too busy seeking and holding the radar beam to offer any answer. Tight-lipped and pensive, he spiralled the *Or Bust* down toward frozen Styx in narrowing concentric loops.

"Landing always gets me dizzy," Trudy finally said to break the silence.

"Your imagination. Because you know we circle a moon, slowing down below the speed of escape and finally spiralling to planetfall, you get dizzy. But the circle's too large; your equilibrium is too concerned with the ship and not the satellite to make you dizzy. As I said, your imagination."

"So, people get seasick and—never mind. Craig?"

"Umm?"

"Craig, I can't figure this thing out. I mean, if everything got squared away though Telliance and now this Colonel what's-his-name tells us there's no such animal . . ."

Craig shrugged, but not indifferently. "We know absolutely nothing about Operation Zero, so we can't be expected to know about the things which make it tick. Let's wait till after planetfall."

"Who doesn't know anything about Operation Zero? I read in the *Martian Monthly*—"

"Sure, and in the *Zurich Zephyr*—"

"There's no such paper!"

"I know, but you get the idea. All lurid scandal sheets afflicted with sensation-itis. They don't know any more about Zero than Telliance does—and take it from me and Avery, Telliance knows nothing."

"At least we'll soon find out for them, sweet."

"Don't forget Colonel Tansley. I wouldn't be too sure."

A few moments later the *Or Bust* belied its name by settling down without a quiver on the bleak, frozen methane-ammonia surface of Styx.

No brass bands greeted them. Nor top brass with warm handshakes, nor speechmaking on the occasion of the first civilian craft to planetfall on home base for Operation Zero—nor anything of the sort, for the matter.

At least they did not have to wear the clumsy, cumbersome spacesuits of five years ago. In a sense, the passing of the spacesuit marked the end of an era: spelling finish as it did for the age of space pioneering, of swashbuckling from planet to planet when each new world challenged brave men with the unknown. Gone was the bulky insulating equipment, the necessity for moving about like a third-rate robot, the need for electrical power to supplement overburdened muscles. In its place: the almost-ubiquitous forcefield, a millionth of perfect insulation, complete protection—invisible, weightless, allowing absolute freedom of movement. Except for a rather light oxygen tank with hose and mask, the forcefield sufficed for space gear.

Garbed in field and mask now, Craig and Trudy left the lock of the *Or Bust*. Trudy wore the briefest of halter and shorts, pale ice-blue and iridescent ash of rose. Women affected the scantiest of garments on the outworlds not because they had gone exhibitionist, Craig realized, but because it was a natural reaction to the shapeless spacesuit era. Not all women naturally: for some the long skirt, the kirtled bathing suit, the inflated undergarments were an understandable necessity. But Trudy's fine young figure curved pettily and alluringly in the right places, leaving a wake of loud whistles and staring eyes on the outworlds.

"Adams and Adams?" A burly

provost marshal sergeant demanded, attempting with some success to maintain his military dignity while ogling Trudy.

"Right," said Craig, his voice carrying clearly over the tiny microphone imbedded by plastisurgery in his palate. "I believe Colonel Tansley wants to see us about—"

"About some mistake his office made!" Trudy finished indignantly.

"Yes, Ma'am," the sergeant assured her. "A mistake on someone's part. Won't you follow me, please?"

Craig led the way, followed by Trudy. The sergeant must have changed his mind, for he brought up the rear, making a careful and apparently happy scrutiny of the swinging arrangement of Trudy's hips and pelvic bones.

Styx's glass-smooth surface offered absolutely no traction. And since no one had yet figured out how to sandpaper a force field, Craig and Trudy felt they were on ice skates. The sergeant had grown accustomed to the situation; he chafed at their slow, tightrope progress. He seemed relieved when they entered an air-lock, leaving the faintly purple atomic flares which lit Styx's frozen surface behind them. However, his eyes still lingered on a derriere view of Trudy's anatomy.

Air hissed into the lock, a quartz-enclosed sign blinked on and off with the words "Earth Normal." Craig clenched his fist, fingering the flat disc surfaced in his palm. He shed

his force field merely by dispersing the interatomic binding forces of which it was composed into air. When the inner door opened, revealing a well-lighted hallway, they all filed through.

"Someday they'll figure out a way to wrap a force field around an entire building," predicted Trudy. "Or a city, or a planet." She frowned petulantly. "But first they'll have to straighten out men like Colonel Tansley; his type have a way of making civilization walk a treadmill."

"Hey, you're bitter," Craig smiled. "Haven't even met the man yet."

"You're about to, sir," the sergeant informed them, gesturing toward a door on which appeared the words:

HEADQUARTERS COMMANDANT
OPERATION ZERO
OFFICE OF THE
SECURITY OFFICER

A chunky enlisted woman, approaching middle age too rapidly to adjust herself, snickered slightly at Trudy's wisps of ice-blue and rose-ash garments, then conferred impersonally with the sergeant.

"This way, please," said the sergeant, opening still another door and saluting smartly the figure seated behind a huge desk in the otherwise bare and windowless room.

Makes you feel uneasy just walking in here, Craig thought. Perhaps that was the idea. Bare of anything but the great quasi-oak desk the long coffin-shaped room offered a feeling of no warmth whatsoever. Stark

gray walls rose grimly from obsidian black floor to slate-colored ceiling. The room's great, unbroken length—thirty-five feet of empty black floor Craig guessed—gave a tapering impression. It appeared as if you were looking at the figure behind the desk through the wide end of a funnel with reversed binoculars.

Colonel Tansley aided the impression. Barely tall enough not to be accused of dwarfism, he had a pale, gaunt, square-boned face with big, nervous eyes, an Apache shock of white hair, a huge hyper-thyroid Adam's apple. He jumped up nervously after returning the sergeant's salute, offering his small chair behind the large desk to Trudy. When she declined it, he sat down again, settling himself with a series of graceless jerks until only that part of him from the big Adam's apple up appeared over the desk top.

"I am Colonel Tansley," he said unnecessarily, his voice almost making up for what his face and dwarfish body lacked. A deep resonance surrounded his words with the suggestion of an echo. He enunciated every syllable crisply, clearly, with a natural ease that precluded affectation. He looked the smallest of small men, yet he spoke like an empire builder.

"Sergeant," he said. The sergeant left. "Now then," he said.

Trudy extracted a cigarette from some miraculously concealed pocket. "I hope you've checked on your mis-

take and cleared things for us, Colonel."

"There was no need to check, young woman. I know. I *know*. The area beyond Neptune's orbit is still security space. You have violated it."

"That's fantastic," Trudy said in spite of Craig's warning look.

To amend her cold assertion, Craig told the Colonel, "We have our papers. Everything's in order as far as I can see."

"Umm," said the colonel, taking the sheaf of papers Craig offered. The colonel had a way of making even a curt, wordless syllable seem meaningful. Craig could picture how he climbed to his eagle's wings in his voice, while the rest of him stood as a barrier keeping the coveted general's star out of reach.

"The first one is our contract with Telliance," Craig explained. "The second is clearance from a Major Whiting out here."

"Never heard of him," said Colonel Tansley, pressing a stud on his desk and speaking into the panel receiver. "Personnel? Tansley. What do you have on a Major Whiting? Of course . . . Yes. Uh, I thought so."

"Well?" Trudy demanded.

"There never was a Major Whiting at this Headquarters. Let me see the other one. Um. Charles Avery, eh?" There was an awkward silence while Colonel Tansley placed a sub-ether call through to Telliance on the moon. Finally: "I'd like to speak with a Mr. Charles Avery, Military

Liaison Section . . . You are sure?
Very well, thank you."

"Well?" Trudy asked again, pleading more than demanding this time.

"See here," said Tansley, "we don't have a Major Whiting. I knew that but I checked with Personnel to make sure. As for Telliance, they never heard of Charles Avery. What kind of a hoax do you think you're

pulling with your clever forgeries, Mr. Adams?"

Craig bristled. He had to take the colonel's word on Major Whiting, but Charles Avery he had known for years. Moving up through the editorial-executive hierarchy of Telliance, Avery had been, for the past three years, chief of the important Liaison Section, a man everyone at Telliance



knew. A hoax was in the making all right, but Craig had no part in it.

Tact often vents itself in ridiculous cliché. "There must be some mistake," said Craig.

When the colonel laughed without vocalizing, the power of his voice was forgotten. If you closed your eyes when he spoke, you heard authority. If you looked at him when he was silent, you saw a mean, petty old man. All of this Craig thought in a split second, sufficient time for him to lose his temper under the circumstances.

"If you just stopped laughing and started trying to do something about it, this business might still make sense. Three billion miles is too far to come on a wild-goose chase."

"Attaboy!" Trudy cheered him.

"No one asked you to come," the colonel reminded him coldly.

"Charles Avery and Major Whiting asked us."

"As far as I can ascertain, they have no existence. But all this is quite pointless. Styx lies deep within security space. You have violated security by coming here and because you are civilians you do not fall under the jurisdiction of a military court. Under Solar System Law 174, however, you can be tried in a civilian court. There remains but one thing, first: we will have to erase all convolutions from your brains for the past thirty days."

"Never," Trudy said firmly, the

suggestion making her feel somehow unclean.

"You can't leave Styx until we do. That's the law."

With a device which stemmed from the twentieth century's electroencephalogram, specified synapses in the brain could be short-circuited, Craig knew, causing no injury beyond a complete lapse of memory for the specified period of time. But if that happened, they'd be trundled back toward Earth. Not only would they fail to cover Zero for Telliance, they'd wind up on trial as well. The consequences could be serious under the specifications of the law.

"What you say is true, Colonel," Craig agreed. "We can't leave Styx unless we undergo your brain treatment."

"I'm glad you're sensible, Mr. Adams."

"On the other hand," Craig went on, enjoying himself, "it is against the law for you to force us to undergo the treatment."

"And we refuse!" Trudy cried.

"That's right. We refuse. You can't out-space us without the treatment; you can't force the treatment on us; looks like we'll stay here on Styx forever—or until this mess is cleared up."

"To our satisfaction," Trudy added. "Have someone arrange quarters for us, please."

The colonel's spare-featured face contorted briefly. But the ugly scowl vanished in a fraction of a second,

sweeping his features so quickly that all but a careful observer would have missed it entirely. "I will call Billeting," he told them. "Whenever you change your mind, I'll make a car available to take you to the space-field."

"Watch our ship," Trudy told him. "The *Or Bust* has some mighty expensive equipment in it."

"I'll call Billeting," said Colonel Tansley, looking stony-faced at a spot on the wall midway between Craig and Trudy.

Assigned a large room in an unused wing of Bachelor Officers' Quarters, Craig and Trudy began their wait. Three days later, they were still waiting. They slept in officers' quarters, ate at officers' mess, passed the day's civilities with the junior and senior officers they encountered at mealtime. But they never pierced the barrier of social amenities. It was as if they were a species of animal distinct: to be catered to, tolerated, provided for, possibly humored.

"We could spend a hundred years here like this and learn nothing about Operation Zero," Trudy told her husband.

"Don't I know it. Best vacation we had in years, though."

"Ooo, Craig! How could you? Interplanetary Telliance isn't paying us to take any vacation—if sitting around on your rump and doing nothing is what you call a vacation."

"Far as I know," Craig told her dryly, "they're not paying us for anything. Avery doesn't exist, remember."

"Well, I've had exactly all of this I can take. Sit around if you want, I'm going outside to find out what's going on."

"Why don't you just wait, honey, and—"

"*You* wait. I'm going."

"Well, okay. I don't think you'll get very far, or I'd go with you. Be careful."

She looked at him scornfully, he thought, then left. Craig shrugged. If he had thought Trudy would get very far he either would have accompanied her or made her stay. But he'd seen the provost marshal men everywhere; he suspected strongly he and his wife were under some sort of house arrest. If Trudy had to take a look see—and knowing Trudy, he knew she had to—he could at least remain behind over a period of time convincing the p. m. men they didn't have to worry about him. That way, should the occasion arise, he'd disappear more readily.

Trudy returned in five minutes, under escort. It was the same burly sergeant who had conducted them to Colonel Tansley's office, and Craig wondered briefly if the man had wangled this new assignment to be where he could see Trudy in this woman-starved world.

"I'm sorry, sir," the sergeant said. "Please tell your wife she has the run

of this wing of the BOQ, the Mess Hall and the Exchange. You're both forbidden to go outside or into any of the other wings of the building."

"Forbidden?" Trudy snapped. "By whom? By what authority?"

"By Colonel Tansley, Ma'am. I wouldn't know about the authority; I take my orders from the colonel. But he said to tell you, you could space out any time you decided to take the treatment."

"Well, you can tell him—no, I'm a lady. Don't tell him anything."

"It won't happen again," Craig said blandly.

Trudy looked at him, colored. "You . . . mouse!" she squealed.

Someone's got to play the straight man, Craig thought, hoping he'd at least remain on speaking terms with his wife until whatever happened happened.

Granting them the polite suggestion of a salute, the burly sergeant about-faced and departed, his eyes on Trudy until the door slid shut.

"Well," said Trudy.

"Well, what?"

"Do you plan to retire out here or something? We've got to do something, but I can't carry the ball all by myself."

"You're missing the boat on giving it a pretty good whirl."

"You can talk! Well, how do you mean?"

Craig gestured toward the door. "Our friend the sergeant."

"I'm listening."

"The guy's got a crush on you big enough to squash a dinosaur."

"I know. Cute too, in a way."

"Huh?"

"I can't help it if he finds me . . . attractive," Trudy smiled demurely.

"Well, anyway—now, I don't know . . ."

"What were you going to say?"

"That you should cultivate it, that's all. Maybe the sergeant could do us some favors when the time comes."

"What?" Trudy gasped. "Sell myself? Sell myself—for a story?"

"Yeah. There are limits, honey, and I was thinking—"

"I'll put my own boundaries around this operation, thank you," said Trudy tartly. "It was your idea."

Craig regretted his idea almost at once. Having to put up with the antics of a sergeant, whose former civilian occupation could be listed as infant, wasn't exactly stimulating. But Trudy managed it somehow, for the sergeant visited every day both officially and unofficially. And it wasn't long before Trudy would disappear with him for hours on end, always at night, always bundled in cloak and hood he provided for the purpose. She remained secretive about where they went. She smiled coquettishly and when Craig could no longer keep the torrent of questions back, she told him to stop nagging.

"Okay," he said wearily one night

after she had returned. "At least tell me this: are you getting any place?"

"That's a good question. The answer is according to what you mean."

"You know what I mean. Are you learning anything about Zero?"

"It's like pulling teeth," Trudy admitted. "You see, the sergeant and I have different objectives. His amuses me."

"I don't find it so funny."

"Neither does Herman."

"Herman!"

"Herman is deadly serious about it. But I found out something, hon. Did you know why they call this Operation Zero?"

"Umm—no. I never thought about it."

"Because they're playing around with absolute zero, that's why. Herman took me on a guided tour of a big place with a device in it that looked like the biggest centrifuge I ever saw. But Herman said it was no centrifuge. It was a machine for slowing down molecular activity."

"That's funny," said Craig. "If the average layman thought about it, he'd say produce the cold first, then slow down your molecules—or let the cold do it for you. According to what you could glean from what's-his-name, here they worry about molecular activity first."

"Right. If they can slow it to a standstill, they'd have absolute zero. Herman heard some technicians talking, he said. The reason they could never get absolute zero before was

they were tackling the thing backwards. So, it looks like we're getting somewhere."

"Except that we don't know why they're so interested in absolute zero. I always thought it was a laboratory problem, nothing more. But twenty years of top secrecy on a hush-hush problem doesn't sound like a laboratory exercise to me. Does Herman know anything about it?"

"I wouldn't bet on it, Craig. Trouble is, Herman's reached the point where he wants to trade information for . . . well—"

"Listen," Craig said. "Go with him again tomorrow. I'll follow you, so if you want to let Herman get frisky, go ahead. I'll be right there."

"My hero. Thank you. How do you know I want to let Herman get frisky?"

"Don't worry. I'll be there."

"Is that so? How do you know I *don't* want Herman to get frisky?"

Women, thought Craig. *Females*. "You go with him. Now, shut up. I'll be there. Good night."

And Craig stretched, turned over, fell asleep and had a nightmare about Herman. They were engaged in a death struggle on the mirror-smooth surface of Styx. Every time Craig got the upper hand he slipped on what was worse than a world of banana peels, stumbled to his knees and froze there while Trudy's voice floated to him from some offstage part of the dream, laughing and saying "absolute zero" over and over again.

The next night, Craig waited thirty seconds, squeezed his force field into place and followed Trudy and the sergeant outside. No sound carried across the airless surface of Styx, and with only the aid of purple nightlamps on their tall, wraith-thin poles, one could not see very far. Once or twice Craig melted back into the shadows of the long one-story BOQ when officers hurrying on one errand or another approached him. But doggedly he managed to keep Trudy and the sergeant in view.

After a time, they cut away from the BOQ's sheltering darkness and went out across a broad, night-purple tract of Styx's smoother-than-glass surface. Cursing softly to himself, Craig followed. Discovery might bring serious consequences. Still the sergeant's leisurely gait instilled confidence. Breathing more easily, Craig concluded the way lead along a little-used path.

Soon a low cluster of buildings loomed up out of the purple dusk. They were squat and as completely graceless, Craig observed, as most military structures. Trudy and the sergeant were lost in the gloom and Craig began running. He reached the first building in time to see its door sliding shut. Fuming, he tugged at the opening lever, in vain realizing that a snap lock held the door fast from inside. He braced his feet against one side of the casing and his back against the other. Craig was on the point of trying to force the

door along its runners despite the lock when a voice purred in his receiver.

"Hold it, please." There was no hair-pulling, no ranting, no jumping up and down. But calm authority in just three words can set a person's heart to pounding all the harder.

Craig released the handle, slumped. His feet slid from the door casing to Styx's tractionless surface. He lost his balance, skidded, fell flat on his stomach and slid along, losing virtually none of his inertia, until his groping hands encountered a pair of boots. Calm authority surrendered before a stream of invective; someone tumbled on top of Craig and they skidded together, finally coming to a stop fifteen yards from the doorway.

Boots served about the same function under a force field as long underwear in the Venusian swamplands, but the provost marshal lieutenant who untangled himself from Craig and tried to stand up wore boots.

"My foot," he groaned, more in confusion than pain. "I can't stand."

Craig squinted in the dim light. Despite the boot, he could see the man's misshapen lower leg. From the looks of it, the man had suffered a compound fracture. "Call for help," the man told Craig. "Incidentally, you are under arrest." He fingered clumsily the holster at his left side.

He was kneeling, Craig was sitting. Craig came up at him in a mo-

tion as quick as Styx's surface would support. They rolled over again, the officer moaning, and when Craig tumbled clear he had the compact weapon in his hand.

"You can't do that," the lieutenant said a few times, his voice now a childish treble. "I know all about you, Mr. Adams. Thought you had us where it hurt; but now you attacked me, you're subject to military justice."

"Shut up," said Craig, "and listen to me. First, do you have the key to this place?"

The lieutenant screwed up his face and made a lewd gesture.

Unfortunately, Craig knew, the man knew what he was talking about. After this, Tansley would have him cold. Thanks to the Army's refusal to accept the tiny, plastisurged radios in place of standard gear, he might have a few hours in which to act. After that—he didn't know.

Deftly, Craig jerked the lieutenant's radio transmitter away from the fallen man's head. He dropped it, then stepped on it, grinding his heel until a small mound of black and silver debris lay at his feet. "Now, listen to me. You can hear, but you can't talk back. Do you good for a change, I'll bet."

The lieutenant's response, necessarily mute, made up for what it lacked in sound by the wealth of hatred in facial expression.

"I want that key if you've got it.

If you make me search you, I'm going to play rough, starting with your broken leg." It was all a bluff. Craig had nothing against the lieutenant, was feeling sorrier for the man and his badly fractured leg every moment.

Doing everything but sticking out his tongue, the lieutenant reached into a pocket, withdrew a ring of keys, threw it on the ground.

Craig retrieved it and said, "It should take you a good long time to crawl away for help. If they want to get me they'll have to come in after me." Craig tried one key after another from the ring until he found the right one. As he entered the airlock he glanced back at the lieutenant, who was dragging himself away, foot by painful foot, trailing the injured leg behind him.

Fidgeting while he waited for normal pressure and atmosphere, Craig had time to wonder how Trudy was faring with her would-be swain. It suddenly occurred to him he might extricate himself from any serious trouble by claiming the whole thing as an affair of the heart. Which would probably leave the poor sergeant with more bad time to serve than he had years left in military service. Well . . .

And then the "Earth Normal" sign blinked on, admitting Craig to the building proper.

The voice he heard when he shed his force field was decidedly feminine, but the words were as unlady-

like as any he'd ever heard. The voice was shouting and it belonged to Trudy.

Craig sprinted down a corridor, guided by his wife's voice. He found an unlocked door, slid it open, rushed through. Something met him head on, charging in the other direction. Craig tumbled over backwards, his head striking the floor with sufficient force to stun him.

He blinked his eyes, shook his head. In a daze, Trudy was just scrambling off him, nursing her own head. "Craig, for God's sake—"

"Stay where you are, both of you." It was the provost marshal sergeant,

standing in the doorway, the twin of Craig's weapon in his hand. Hair disheveled, scratches on his cheek, uniform in disarray, face flushed—he wasn't fooling.

Craig shrugged, sat where he was. "What happened?"

Trudy grinned, after fighting down a half-pucker. "You decided to come in just when I was going out. We were both in a hurry, that's all."

"I've been played for a sucker long enough," said the sergeant, whose name, Craig remembered, was Herman.

"I'm a married woman," Trudy protested.



"That didn't seem to bother you till tonight."

"You didn't try anything to make it bother me till tonight."

"Yeah, well now I know what you were after—what you really wanted."

"Amazing," said Trudy.

"You're married, all right. You and your husband both—to a mess of trouble."

"Is that so?" Craig demanded, getting to his feet.

"I warned you to sit still."

"Come off it, Herman. Put that sticker away. If you think we're in trouble, you're crazy. Anything you try to convict us with will implicate you so deeply they'd have to dig clear through to the other side of Styx to find you."

"You are trespassing," Herman said desperately.

Craig nodded. "Sure. And just what were you doing?"

Herman's already crimson face purpled.

Craig drove his point home. "First, you were seen in the company of a woman, confined to quarters, outside her quarters. You were escorting her."

"Yeah? Y-yeah . . . Well, who saw me?"

"I did, if you're going to press charges. Second; you . . . but why don't we let Mrs. Adams tell it?"

"He assaulted me," said Trudy. "He tried to—"

"Yeah . . ." said Herman, doubtlessly viewing himself in a prison-

er's uniform, doing a tour of forced prospecting on one of the asteroid stockades.

"That's number two," Craig told him cheerfully. "Number three, if Trudy wanted to see the inside of this building, I suspect it's off limits—to you as well as us."

"Darling, how right you are," said Trudy.

"Yeah," said Herman in horror.

"And finally," Craig broke the sergeant's spirit with every word, "I had a little run-in with an officer outside. He's disabled, but not so much he can't fetch help. He'll be here soon, with every military cop on Styx. Is that clear?"

The sergeant gaped.

"Yeah," Trudy said for him.

"Sixteen years of service shot to hell," groaned Herman. "Sixteen years."

"Don't just stand there!" Trudy cried. "You're doomed, if you do. Get out; go on—beat it. You forget everything, we'll forget everything. Right, Craig?"

"Right," said Craig.

Herman looked at them, moved past them slowly, in a daze. By the time he was a dozen feet away, he'd broken into a run.

Trudy stared at Craig. Craig stared back. It was Trudy who smiled first. Presently, they started to laugh and kept right on laughing for a good three minutes, until tears ran down their cheeks, until they sat there, feeling weak.

Finally, Trudy managed to say, "You didn't mean what you said about that officer bringing help."

"Unfortunately, I did."

"Umm. How much time have we?"

"Very little, I'm afraid. Is there another way out of this place?"

"I wouldn't know, Craig. We came in this way, Herman and I. I—I saw what we're after, I think, and then Herman got scared. The first thing he did was, well—he demanded payment. Poor boy."

"Poor boy," said Craig. "What did you see?"

"Craig, it's fantastic. You probably think you know what Operation Zero is about."

"Sure, we discussed it before. They're trying to produce absolute zero, the temperature at which all molecular activity ceases."

"They've already produced it."

"What?"

"That's right. Years ago. They're after something much bigger than that—although absolute zero makes it possible."

"Weapon?" Craig demanded.

"Hold that for later. Transportation. How to go further than we've ever traveled before. Thousands of times further."

"Thousands . . . interstellar?"

"Interstellar."

The idea left you breathless. If you spoke to a man about interplanetary travel forty or fifty years after the first airplane shuddered a few

yards through the air, he might feel that way. A way to bridge the abyss—it might as well have been infinity—between the stars.

"Interstellar," said Trudy again. "You see—"

"No, I don't. I don't see a lot of things. I wish I did, but not now. Now isn't the time. This isn't the place. They'll be flocking here any minute. We've got to get away and—"

"And what, honey? This is Stryx. We'd never reach the *Or Bust* or any other ship. What good would running away do? They'd find us inside of hours."

"They'll find us inside of minutes if we stay here. But what's on your mind?"

"I think we ought to stay—until we can get the proof we need."

"Proof?"

"The military's botching things something awful. This could be the greatest stride science has taken in decades. But it won't be—if the military has anything to do with it."

"But you said they were interested in interstellar travel."

"They? You mean the military? No, not really. There are some scientists here—"

"Civilians?"

"Yes."

"But I thought—"

"—That no civilians were permitted beyond Neptune's orbit. Me too, but that's wrong. Scientists working on the project are permitted, a couple

of hundred of them from what I could find out. You should see those scientists, Craig. I met three of them tonight. They want to travel between the stars so bad it almost makes them cry."

"You saw them tonight?"

"Yes, here in this building. They live down below."

"Why didn't you say so? Maybe they can hide us. Maybe—"

"Hold on," said Trudy. "We'll cross that bridge if we have to. So, these physicists, chemists, biologists—cream of the solar system crop, no doubt—are working on interstellar travel. That's what they think! Oh, Craig, it isn't hard to pull the wool over someone's eyes when he's concentrating so hard on one thing he hasn't got time for anything else. The military—"

"You sure have grown a healthy dislike for the military!"

"It isn't all of them, Craig. Just that group in charge here. You wouldn't believe me if I tell you what the scientists think—and also, incidentally, that's why they wouldn't do us much good hiding us. They're about in the same boat. Under house arrest, you might say."

"Okay, what do the scientists think?"

"That Colonel Tansley and his crowd are planning some kind of coup. They might do it, too, given enough time and provided what they have the scientists working on is a success."

Craig's head was swimming. He almost felt like an audience of one, viewing a play which unfolded something new and startling every time the scene shifted. And he wished passionately that he hadn't let Trudy go on her Herman-sponsored outings without him, for getting this information second hand was in some ways worse than not getting it at all.

"What kind of coup do you have in mind?" Craig wanted to know. "Surely they wouldn't dare try to take over the colonial government on Pluto. There aren't many dome-cities, I know, but the colonial government represents the Solar System Federation."

"I didn't have the Pluto government in mind, Craig. I was thinking as these boys are thinking—of the entire solar system."

"You're joking." *Ring down the curtain*, he thought. *Ten minute intermission while the audience sweats it out. A crummy little colonel with a big man's voice taking over the solar system.*

"I wish I were. You asked about a weapon. They'll have a weapon all right."

"I don't see where interstellar travel—"

"That's to mollify the scientists. At the same time, they're working on something else for Tansley and his boys. Incidentally, Tansley figures to be third in command if the coup works though. From what I've heard,

he wouldn't be beyond killing off the other two."

"How I wish I were young and pretty and Sergeant Herman Whosiz had a crush on me!"

"Craig, what happens at absolute zero?"

"Why, all molecular motion ceases."

"Correct. Let me ask you two more questions. What's the deadliest weapon we've ever produced?"

"The Hydrogen Bomb. But it's too damned costly, the materials too damned rare. Only a few of them exist."

"Good. What's number two on the hell parade of weapons?"

"The atom bomb, naturally. Relatively inexpensive, but comparatively limited in power because you can go right on building a hydrogen bomb to any size, but you can't keep on adding to an atom bomb. It contains two pieces of fission material. When they reach critical mass—ka-bloom! So they have to be pretty small."

"Well, what would happen if your atom bomb were built and stored at absolute zero?"

"So that's it!" Craig laughed easily. The growing tension within him relaxed. "Don't worry, Trudy. Their theory is all wet. Sure molecule action ceases at absolute zero, but subatomic action doesn't. When the atom bomb material reaches critical mass, as I said: ka-bloom."

"Wrong, at least in practice, if not

in theory. There should be an explosion, but there wouldn't be—because an explosion is concerned with molecular movement. Doesn't matter what the source of the explosion is, it's still molecular movement. Maybe an explosion would exist, in limbo. The blow up would come if your bomb got itself warmed.

"See what that means, Craig? No limit on the size or power of atomic weapons. Keep on building and building and building. Make the equivalent of cheap hydrogen bombs, in quantity. Craig, I'm scared."

"What's all this got to do with interstellar travel?" Craig asked weakly. He was no scientist—but if the boys with the gray matter here said it was so, it was so.

"Not a blessed thing. The Tansley group gets one for the other. And the scientists here are a pathetic lot. Every time they waiver, Tansley dangles the stars in front of their myopic eyes. You can't blame them."

"I suppose so." If Tansley held Trudy and told Craig to finish some work or else, Craig would finish it. It wouldn't be stretching a point to say the stars were the scientists' Trudy. "Then Tansley can demonstrate his weapon, prove it functions, convince the world it can be produced in quantity at a cost which isn't prohibitive, start demanding more and more—and wind up with the solar system in the palm of his hand."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Well," mumbled Craig.

"Don't just sit there saying 'well.' I've got you up to date. Do something. Think of something. Anything. Please."

"How far have they got?"

"Too far. Almost finished. Maybe another year until it's too late for everything."

"Hey!" Craig cried, rising from lethargic acceptance of what might be pending horror. "We're not completely alone."

"The scientists are stuck here, just like us."

"I'm not talking about them. There's Charlie Avery—and Major Whiting, whatever happened to him. Apparently, some people wanted to expose this thing, and maybe they thought if a couple of reporters with a nose for news smelled this thing out and could somehow get it across to the solar system . . ."

"You're whistling in the dark. Tansley called Telliance. They never heard of Avery. Major Whiting doesn't exist."

"We've been a couple of fools! How do we know Major Whiting doesn't exist? Tansley appeared to call Personnel. Tansley said so. How do we know Telliance disavowed Avery? Same reason. Tansley said so. Damn it, Trudy, he took us for a couple of yokels—and that's what we were. I'll bet Major Whiting's sitting around here someplace either wondering what happened to us or trying to contact us. And Charlie Avery

must be frantic. If only we could get through to Charlie—"

"If only we could don Icarus' wings and fly from here, careful not to approach the sun too closely because Icarus—"

"Cut it out; I'm serious. All the equipment we need is in the *Or Bust*. We could get in touch with Charlie, maybe even broadcast a warning, maybe let the system know what's going on."

"Sure, but the *Or Bust* might as well be sitting on Neptune. We'd never get out of this building, let alone reach it. Shh!"

"I didn't say anything."

"No, I thought I heard something. There, listen!"

From far away came the sound of footsteps: many feet, running briskly.

"That would be the broken-legged lieutenant's reinforcements."

"Craig, what can we do?"

"Start conjuring up your scientists."

"Huh?"

"Hurry up. Lead the way to them."

"All right, but—"

"We'll discuss the pros and cons later. Move."

They got up, Trudy leading the way across the threshold into a large bare room, the walls of which were one great, continuous filing cabinet. "I've seen some of those records," Trudy said. "You'd be amazed—"

"Later. Move."

She moved. The footsteps approached them rapidly. Voices shouted. She moved faster.

Trudy led the way in anxious silence through the great empty room, out through an archway beyond it, down a flight of stairs. For a while at least, the voices and pounding feet behind them receded. Craig realized it was a temporary reprieve, for Tansley's men probably had strict orders to take them.

Hardly pausing at the bottom of the stairs, which stood at the apex of a v-shaped forked corridor, Trudy set off down the left passage at a fast trot. In a matter of minutes they reached a heavy metal door. She knocked impatiently and abruptly the door swung in away from them.

Sleeves rolled up, a two-day stubble of beard on his face, myopic eyes squinting from behind thick spectacles ludicrously askew on the bridge of his nose, a plump middle-aged man stood in the doorway.

"Ah," he said, "the reporter woman. Perhaps we can continue our conversation now."

"Well—" began Trudy.

"You see, not too many people would think to connect absolute zero with interstellar travel, but it's merely a question of cooling a living organism to absolute zero in the right space of time—then preserving it indefinitely that way. A man can remain in suspended animation that way indefinitely, and since interstellar flight is completely automatic ex-

cept for the taking off and the actual planetfall, a live crew isn't a necessity. It might take us twenty years to reach Alpha Centauri, young woman, but we can reach it."

"You told me all that," said Trudy, "but we're here to see—"

"Strange that they don't forget this other thing, this bomb-freezing, at least long enough for us to continue our experiments. We've been promised some experimental animals to work with but we're always being put off. Every day it's something else, I don't know what. Who's your friend?"

"My husband, Dr. Lusker. Craig Adams, Dr. Lusker."

"How do you do, young man?" The scientist adjusted his spectacles to see more clearly. "Are you a reporter too?"

"Damned right," Craig told him. "We can blow the lid off this whole phony set-up, too, with your help."

"Blow the lid—?"

"What he means," Trudy explained, "is that the military establishment out here doesn't give two hoots and a holler for your work with interstellar travel, and—"

"That's just what Dr. Rankow has been saying, but Rankow is young and prone to irritability."

"Rankow's right," Craig declared. "All Colonel Tansley and his men want is a bigger atomic bomb. You're giving it to them, too."

"I know, I know. And then we'll have military cooperation and gov-

ernment expenditures to build the first interstellar spaceship."

"We went through all that before with Dr. Rankow," Trudy told him. "It's incredible you can't see the wool being pulled over your eyes, Doctor."

"Well, now, I don't know. I'm a bio-physicist, not a politician. But if you can prove what you say—"

"Right now," Craig almost shouted, "Tansley's men are out gunning for us. They'd like to take us alive because there'd be a pretty big stink otherwise, but I think they'll take us however they can, one way or the other."

"Why? What are you talking about?"

"Because we know too much. Because we came here to get a story and Tansley reneged. Did you ever hear of a Major Whiting?"

"Whiting? Whiting? Why, yes—nice chap. Very interested in our work, the most cooperative of them all. Surely if Major Whiting is representative of the military men behind Operation Zero, you're all mixed up, Mr. Adams."

"That's just it. Whiting's disappeared. Tansley claims he doesn't exist. You see, it was Whiting who gave us permission to come here."

"Peculiar, if true."

Exasperation mounted in Craig. They couldn't even broach the subject of protection, let alone help, until Dr. Lusker saw at least part of the situation for what it was. By the

time he climbed down from his ivory tower, it might be too late.

Suddenly, Craig heard the sound of many feet on the stairs. Tansley's men were on the way down.

"Get inside!" he cried, and Trudy tugged at Dr. Lusker's arm.

"My dear child, please. I'll stay and see what all this is about."

Their orders would be to take the prisoners alive, Craig thought. Yet if a demonstration of violence could make Dr. Lusker act, trickery might prove excusable, especially since a lot more than their own hides might depend on what happened here on Styx. Dr. Lusker was in earnest conversation with Trudy when Craig saw the vanguard of the military policemen turn up the corridor, weapons drawn. Craig fingered his own paramatic clumsily, then raised it, deliberately aiming over the heads of the onrushing soldiers and firing. Several return volleys hissed harmlessly off the wall on all sides of them, a little too close for comfort.

"See?" Craig roared. "They're firing at us in cold blood. Get inside before you get killed!"

"Hmm. Dr. Rankow's thesis certainly has been fortified."

"Get going."

Another volley hissed closer. Craig almost flung Dr. Lusker bodily within the room, banging the door shut behind them.

"I must find Dr. Rankow and tell him about this," said the unabashed Dr. Lusker.

Trudy still had hold of his arm. "How strong is that door?"

"Stronger than the wall it is embedded in. You see, in seeking an alloy for the rocket tubes of the interstellar ship we discovered an amazing thing. Steel, when smelted with mol—"

"Never mind," Craig cut him short while locking the door. "Is there any other way out of this place?"

Someone was banging on the door, but according to the scientist, nothing short of a major explosion could jar it loose, so Craig happily ignored the noise.

"Certainly. We have another exit opening out behind the Administration building, I believe. We don't use it much."

"Administration!" Trudy cried in delight. "That's adjacent to the space-field, as I remember. Craig, are you thinking what I'm—"

"I'm way ahead of you. Lead on, Dr. Lusker."

"Eh? On to where?"

"That other exit of yours."

"I do want to find Dr. Rankow and—"

From someplace high on the wall of what Craig now saw was a large ante-room, a loudspeaker blared. "Dr. Lusker! Calling Dr. Lusker."

"Lusker, please," said the scientist, shouting unnecessarily since the receiver was extremely sensitive.

"This is the Security Office calling," said the voice in strident, reso-

nant tones: Colonel Tansley. "A radio report indicates you are harboring two people here on Styx illegally, who have broken their confinement, ruthlessly attacked one of my officers and have made accessible to themselves top secret material concerning the Operation. Unless they're marched outside within five minutes, you are an accessory after the fact, Lusker. If you remain one, you have never been further from the realization of interstellar travel."

Colonel Tansley was most effective that way, when you couldn't see him. Automatically your mind would draw pictures of one of Michelangelo's paintings of Zeus or at the very least one of El Greco's tall, grave demigods.

"You'll have to go," said Dr. Lusker. "I'm sorry."

"We'll go, all right. through the other exit," said Craig. "They'll kill us if we set foot in the corridor." It was a lie, of course, since Tansley would take them alive if he possibly could. Craig spoke in a whisper, for the receiver might pick up anything louder.

"That makes it difficult for me. Uh, just a moment, Colonel. Dr. Rankow, calling Dr. Rankow," he shouted at a grid on the wall. "This is Lusker. Come here quickly."

"Five minutes," said Colonel Tansley's voice. "Why don't you give up, Adams? We'll erase your mind and send you back with a recommendation you don't stand trial."

"Thanks," Trudy said bitterly.

A tall young man, freckle-faced and long-nosed, entered the room from the other side. "Lusker? And the reporters. Thank God."

"You look as if you've seen a ghost," Dr. Lusker exclaimed.

The tall young man—Dr. Rankow—wore a coat of freckles on his face, and they stood out sharply against his pale skin. He was trembling slightly. "Not a ghost, a corpse. Major Whiting is dead."

"Oh, no," Trudy moaned.

"'Fraid so, Miss. I found him quite by accident, out near the space-field. I had to visit Administration on a routine errand and a big crowd had gathered there, near the reporter's ship. A parabeam got Whiting—at full intensity."

"Now Tansley's a killer," Craig told the young scientist, "along with everything else. Whiting probably realized he couldn't get through to us, tried to send some kind of warning himself by using our equipment. Or maybe he just wanted to contact Avery and tell him what was going on. Dr. Rankow . . ."

"Yes?"

"Keep it down to a whisper, please. Tansley's probably listening."

"You have two minutes to make up your mind," said Tansley's clear voice.

"Dr. Rankow, you're on to all of this, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure, but as far as I can see Tansley and his men want to

build bigger and better bombs and ride with them into power. As of today, I stopped working for him, but there isn't much I can do except of a passive nature."

"The devil there isn't!" Trudy hissed in an almost shrieking whisper.

"Just lead us to the *Or Bust*," Craig told him. "Give us ten minutes. In a pinch, make it five. Every Congressional Committee in Tycho Crater will be breathing down Tansley's neck."

"Well, I could take you to your ship, I think. But if there isn't anyone alive to prove what you claim, Tansley will have sufficient time to hide things. All the scientists here could meet with an accident, since we play with some terribly lethal stuff, I'm afraid."

"I see your point. But not if Tansley thinks you're all on his side, Doc."

"Eh?" said the now bewildered Dr. Lusker.

Rankow shrugged, "What do you mean?"

"Just follow my lead and start shouting," Craig whispered, then said, "Is that so, Dr. Rankow? Well, let me tell you something, wise guy. This paramatic in my hand says you're going to do exactly what I say. Yeah, that's right, barricade that door—"

"You'll never get away with it!" Dr. Rankow said, just a shade too theatrically. Realizing this, he grinned and toned down his ap-

proach. "How long do you think you can keep us here as prisoners?"

"I'll hold you as hostages, you mean. Let Tansley try to get us then."

Tansley's voice boomed: "Good man, Dr. Rankow. But don't let him intimidate you."

"Shut that guy's voice off!" Craig shouted, then slapped his palms together twice.

"Ow!" Dr. Rankow moaned. "Please, it won't shut off. It can't shut off. You're hurting me."

"Now really," Dr. Lusker began, but Trudy clapped her hand to his mouth and whispered, "You keep out of this before you wind up never getting that Nobel Prize."

"We're sending reinforcements," Tansley's voice came almost cheerily. "We'll have the laboratories hemmed in from both sides, so you need not worry."

"Now!" Craig hissed. "Lead us out of here."

Dr. Rankow nodded, wheeled about, motioned them to follow him. Lusker threw his arms up almost convulsively and followed them.

With reinforcements coming by way of the Administration building, they had but moments to act. Perhaps even now it was too late. Craig and Trudy, who had literally chased down a hundred stories on a hundred worlds, could run tirelessly, but the two scientists began to wheeze and pant as they hurtled through the laboratories.

"Wasn't cut . . . out . . . for . . .

this!" Dr. Rankow grinned ruefully.

"No comment!" gasped Dr. Lusker. "Let's . . . just . . . get this . . . marathon over . . . with, shall . . . we?"

Craig's heart pounded, not from exertion, when they reached a flight of stair. If Tansley's men had made good time, they might already be trapped. If that were the case—with both exits covered—Craig knew he and Trudy could do nothing but throw in the towel. They'd find themselves in a mess of hot water, but somehow it did not seem important, with the whole solar system possibly at stake. *Maybe we'll be heroes, unless we're killed in the process*, Craig thought with grim amusement which surprised him. He could almost feel the pages of history beckoning on the one hand and a burial in deep space on the other.

Up the stairs they darted, Dr. Rankow shoving the door open. They stood briefly in an airlock, squeezing on their force fields while the lock adjusted. They plunged outside.

Someone shouted. A parabeam zipped through air, almost fanning Craig's cheek. *When they're close and they sting*, he remembered reading somewhere, *they're at low intensity. If they feel numb and cold, brother, start praying.*

Notching his own gun down to its low beam, Craig turned half around and fired. A dozen military police, charging toward them from the spacefield, were shouting and wav-

ing their arms. One of them fell like a stone, was trampled and left behind.

Trudy yelped.

Craig saw her falling, applied a quick brake to his own fast-pumping legs and almost tumbled head-first himself. He caught her up and she was like a sack of grain, not rigid as some of the adventure writers mistakenly claim. Shouldering his burden, Craig ran on, turning to fire upon their pursuers only occasionally.

Dr. Lusker giggled in childish satisfaction. "It's like . . . the telios!" he cried. "Whatever have . . . I . . . been missing?"

The gap had closed considerably, but they'd also halved the distance between themselves and the *Or Bust*, which Craig could see far out across the field, caught in the glare of a battery of floodlights. Two more of the police went down; Dr. Rankow struggled under the burden of the now inert Dr. Lusker.

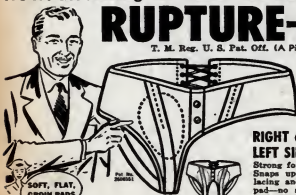
"Don't go on!" Craig cried. "We were taking you with us as hostages, see? Fall, damn it!" The scientists left behind wouldn't fare too well if Rankow and Lusker went with them, Craig suspected. "Go ahead, and thanks . . ."

It wasn't necessary. A parabeam caught Dr. Rankow, pole-axing him

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to the ground. He fell heavily, Lusker atop him, and Craig hardly had time to wonder if any bones had been broken. He plunged ahead with Trudy across his shoulder, not looking back at all now. Instead, he ran in a zig-zag path toward the *Or Bust*, darting, when someone thought to flash a floodlight on him, like a drunken firefly.

The *Or Bust* loomed up suddenly large. A uniformed figure bellowed and came at Craig, arms swinging. He fell before the paramatic and then Craig had flung the airlock of the ship open and leaped inside. He deposited Trudy unceremoniously, had to fire outside and drop some of the police—it was that close—before he could lock it. *I didn't slip once*, Craig congratulated himself. *All that slippery stuff out there, and...* He tripped over Trudy's still form, reached out wildly, and began to fall. His head struck the instrument panel and he sprawled atop Trudy, trying to get up once and then fainting.

"Hey, now! Do I have to do all the work? Get up."

It was Trudy's voice and Trudy's face, caressed by all that fog which was barely beginning to disperse. "Quick!" Craig cried. "Out space the ship or—"

"We are now one hundred thousand miles off Styx, rocketing for Neptune's orbit as fast as the *Or Bust* can carry us. Any questions?"

"Yeah. Are they chasing us?"

"Sure, but so what? Charlie Avery fitted this ship out to get us to Styx in the shortest possible time. They'll never catch us."

Craig got up dizzily, stumbled to the radar screen and watched briefly the angry little pips which hovered way off in one corner of it. While he watched they worked themselves clear off the close-range screen and he had to focus for fifty thousand plus.

"Satisfied?"

"I'll say. Now I'll have to call Avery and—"

"I already have him for you. He's holding the line and busting a gut at the same time."

Swearing, Craig made his way to the radio. "Charlie, Charlie, that you?"

"You're double-damned right it's me. Where did you disappear to, you lame-brained excuse for a reporter? We've had the hook-up waiting. We called and called till we were blue in the face, but a Colonel Tanslitt or Tannhauser or—"

"Tansley."

"Yes, a Colonel Tansley said he never heard of you and were we sure we had a clearance for you, so I told him that—"

"Charlie, never mind. Charlie, listen."

"You listen to me. That's what I get for giving my friend an assignment. Keep it strictly business, the wife always tells me. By George, Craig, you've ruined me. Oh, yes, the

new contract is cancelled. Good-by."

"Wait! Listen, darn it. You got a taper handy?"

"Well . . . yeah, okay. Shoot."

"People sleep on all the worlds of the solar system tonight," said Craig, "unaware that they very nearly lost the freedom they cherish so much. This is Craig Adams of Interplanetary Telliance reporting to you from Pluto's only moon, the satellite Styx. Well, almost, because I'm leaving Styx now—with half the Solar Army in pursuit.

"They found something on Styx which can make bigger and better atomic bombs, if that's what you happen to want out of life. Oh, they

could make really big ones and blow up whole minor planets at one time. Before you get any wrong ideas, don't blame the Army. What we've seen of Styx indicates the Army was the unsuspecting tool of a few power-mad men. But maybe there's a warning in it after all: don't give too much power to any organization which holds a monopoly on arms and armament—it could be tragic.

"If all this is confusing to you, let's put it this way: the military's top secret Operation Zero turned out to be the gravest threat to man's freedom and security since World War III. Armed with a secret weapon you'll be hearing a lot about once

"With God . . .

all things are possible!"

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Congress starts investigating Styx, a few power-crazy officers decided they could take over the Solar System or at least make the try. One man was murdered in the attempt and others might be before Congress has a chance to act.

"That might be the price we pay for too much secrecy. There is nothing the military does—short of actual tactical maneuvers in an actual tactical war—that is so secret civilian agencies can't be informed of it. That's something to remember, all of you, because if something has a chance to go in the wrong direction too long, we might not find ourselves so lucky the next time."

Trudy smiled at him, lit a cigarette, placed it in his mouth.

"I have a hunch you who are hearing my voice aren't as interested in atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, the whole gummy alphabet soup of destruction, as certain people believe. And I'll tell you this: there was something else developed on Styx, despite the worst efforts of a paranoid little would-be dictator to stop it, which could revolutionize our entire outlook on the Universe. It's the sort of thing mankind is really after, if he ever stops to think about it. It's the sort of thing which typifies the spirit which took humanity from the first damp, cold cave to the outside world, to tree houses and dugouts, to huts and towns, and ox-carts and automobiles and copters and jets and rockets and, well, you name it.

"But I'll let you hear it from Trudy Adams, who knows a lot more about *Operation Interstellar* than I do."

Craig leaned back, satisfied, puffing contentedly at his cigarette. There would be a lot more to do later, hard work, incredulous brass hats to convince, lobbies and ornery congressmen and lawsuits and the works. And maybe more talking than he'd ever done in his life. But Congress would investigate. Telliance was big enough to force that, and an investigation, launched soon enough—Avery could swing it—would catch Tansley, if not with Major Whiting's corpse on his hands, then with a bunch of scared, angry, fed-up scientists who could be mighty convincing in their professional wrath.

"What's all this about?" Avery barked. "If half of what you say is true—"

"Did I ever let you down?"

"Umm. No."

"You have the biggest story that ever broke since Telliance got into business. Wait till I reach Earth."

"Craig, boy! Knew I could count on—"

"Shut up, son, and switch that tap-er on. Trudy'll break the good news."

"You mean there's something good in all that?"

"You listen to Trudy, but I tell you what, if you need a couple of crack reporters to cover the landing on one of the Centaurian planets, Trudy and I could use a long sleep after this thing anyway." * * *

Here Is Proof MILLIONS Are Paying Too Much For **VITAMINS!**

Vitamins are costing Americans over three hundred million dollars a year. Much of this vast sum is spent needlessly. It's time folks taking vitamins should be told the plain facts. Stop taking vitamin products just on faith, prestige, and with the mistaken belief that "high price" means "quality." You can learn the truth and be informed! No longer need you complain about the high cost of vitamins. Now you can get quick proof if you are getting your money's worth.

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